

Jandar of Callisto - Jandar 01

By Lin Carter

1. THE LOST CITY OF MANOR

That the most far-reaching and momentous historical events often spring from minute and seemingly inconsequential accidents is a fact which I can attest from my own experience.

For the past four months now-insofar as I have been able to measure the passage of time-I have dwelt on an alien world, surrounded by a thousand foes, struggling and battling my way through innumerable perils to win a place beside the most beautiful woman in two worlds.

And all of these adventures, these wonders and terrors, sprang from a single cause, and that cause was a crumb of dirt half the size of my thumbnail.

As I sit, painfully and slowly setting down these words with a quill pen and homemade ink on a sheet of rough parchment, I cannot help but wonder at the obscure vanity which prompts me to record the tale of my incredible adventures—a tale which began in a lost city deep in the impenetrable jungles of southeast Asia and which ventures from there across the incredible distance of three hundred and ninety million miles of infinite space to the surface of a weird and alien planet. A tale, furthermore, which I deem it most unlikely any other human eye will ever read.

Yet I write on, driven by some inexplicable urge to set down an account of the marvels and mysteries which I alone of all men ever born on earth have experienced. And when at last this narrative is completed, I will set it within the Gate in the hopes that, being composed entirely of organic matter, paper and ink as well, it may somehow be transported across the immeasurable gulf of interplanetary space to the distant world of my birth, to which I shall never return.

In the night sky, at certain seasons when the Inner Moons are on the other side of our primary and the starry skies are clear, I can (I fancy) see the earth. A remote and insignificant spark of blue fire it seems from this distance; a tiny point of light lost amid the blackness of the infinite void. Can it truly be that I was born and lived my first twenty-four years on that blue spark—or was that life but a dream, and have I spent all of my days upon this weird world of Thanator? It is a question for the philosophers to settle, and I am but a simple warrior.

Yet I can well remember my father. He was a tall man, stern-faced and powerfully built, with scowling brows and thick black locks. His name was Matthew Dark; a Scotsman from Aberdeenshire, an engineer by profession, and a wanderer by inclination, he tramped the world to its far corners searching for the joy of life, its richness, its color, which always eluded him and always seemed to beckon from over the next horizon.

From him I seem to have inherited my inches, for like him I am something over six feet; from him, as well, must come my strength, for among men I am reckoned a strong man of great endurance and stamina. But it was from my mother came the gift of my yellow hair and blue eyes, which have none of the dour, darkling Scot in them. She was a Danish girl from a town whose name I cannot pronounce and she died when I was a small child. All that I can remember of her is a soft warm voice, a sweet smiling face bending over me, the touch of a gentle hand. And I seem to see laughing blue eyes, as calm and deep and sparkling as the lakes of her homeland, and the gleam of pale gold hair woven in thick braids—alas, it is only a shard of memory, a brief glimpse into a past which I can never recapture, never completely recall.

The color of my hair and my eyes, these were the only gifts she ever gave me, besides my life itself. But in an odd way I owe her a double debt: for it was for reason of my yellow hair and blue eyes that my life was spared when I fell into the cruel hands of the savage and inhuman warriors of the Yathoon—but I am getting ahead of my own story.

If I owe my mother the double debt of life given and life saved, I at least owe my father for my name, Jonathan Andrew Dark. He was building a great hydroelectric project in Denmark when he met and loved and wed my laughing, blue-eyed mother. She went with him to South America for his next job, for an engineer must go where his work leads him, and wanderers have no home. And thus it chanced that while my mother was a Dane and my father a Scot, and I am now a naturalized American, I was born in Rio.

Of my early life there is little enough to tell. Or, rather, I run the risk of telling too much—for it has little bearing on the saga of my adventures on the fantastic world that has now become my home. A tropical fever carried off my lovely mother when I was only three; my father I seldom saw, for he was off building a highway in Peru, a dam in Bolivia, a bridge in Yucatan. But when death took her from us I became his constant companion. Prim and proper folk might be scandalized to think of a tender child amid the savage surroundings of a jungle camp, but I thrived on the rough, exciting life, and to this I am sure I owe my love of peril and adventure. For I saw the green, stinking interior of the Matto Grosso before I ever saw the interior of a schoolroom, and was familiar with the dangerous rope bridges that span the airy heights of the high Andes before I ever saw a paved city street.

I became a sort of pet or protege to the engineers of my father's camp. It was that laughing bandit Pedro who taught me to throw a knife before I ever learned my letters, and the big Swede, Swenson, who taught me every trick of rough-and-tumble fighting his brawny, battered body had ever learned. I could bring down a hunting jaguar with one cool steady shot straight between its burning eyes even as it sprang for my throat-long before I had mastered the occult mysteries of long division.

Yes, long division—for my formal schooling had been somewhat neglected while I had learned to brew coffee with water taken from a snake-infested jungle stream and heated over kerosene flames in a battered tin pot, to hunt and fight like a man, to climb like a monkey, and to survive where a city-bred boy would have succumbed to fever ticks, snakebite, or cholera. It happened when I was about thirteen. My father had had enough of the banana republics by now; he yearned for the dry, parched air and gorgeous nights of the desert after years spent in the sweltering sinkhole of marshy jungles; he was thinking of an oil-drilling project in Iraq.

But in the back alleys of a vile little jungle town named Puerto Maldonado he ran into an American geologist named Farley, an old friend of many years standing. Puerto Maldonado is in the back country of Peru, on the shores of a river called Madre de Dios, "Mother of God." God, however, had nothing to do with Farley being in Puerto Maldonado: he was hunting for the place where the Incas had gotten their gold.

He had found nothing but ticks, mosquitoes, and a particularly nasty breed of snake the natives called jararaca. It was a nip in the ankle from the venomous fangs of this particular denizen of the jungles that had laid up Farley in the backroom of the only gin mill in Puerto Maldonado for three weeks. My father and his friend celebrated their chance meeting with copious toasts of bad gin in fly-specked glasses, and somewhere between the second and the third bottle my father conceived the notion that I required schooling. Here was Farley, a distinguished geologist with a string of college degrees after his name, like paper tags in the tail of a kite. And here was I, a tall, rawboned, broad-shouldered and sunburnt boy, able enough to hack through the tangled and snake-infested swamps of the Matto Grosso like a veteran, but a green-eared novice when it came to the mystic doctrines of long division.

In less time than it takes me to describe the event, a decision had been reached. Farley was on his way to the coast when the next mail packet came chugging down the coiling silver length of the Madre de Dios; thence overland to the burgeoning young city of Santo Domingo and a bush pilot named O'Mara who would fly him to civilization. He was on his way back to what he described as "God's Country," but what the geography books call the United States of America, and with all possible haste, for there was a professorship open at Harvard for a seasoned field geologist, and he was hungry for the world of cinema, cocktail lounge, and campus. And, besides, he had been lucky this time to have spent only three weeks sweating jararaca venom out of his guts. He preferred not to give the wriggling little monsters the chance for a second bite.

So I was off to America with the would-be Herr Professor, and, to tell the truth, I didn't at all mind the idea. I had become aware in recent months that we men shared the world with a delectable species called girls, and I would find few specimens here in the muddy jungles of Peru, while I was given to understand they were as common in America as was carrapato do chao, the humble ground tick, in this part of the world.

I never saw my father again. An exploding oil pocket in the uplands of Iraq nine months after this sent him to that El Dorado or Valhalla where all old adventurers spend their eternities. God bless him, for the world's a poorer place without him in it.

Not to occupy these pages with an account of the wonders of small-town America, which must be already familiar to my reader-if ever this most unusual journal is fortunate enough to find its way across three hundred and ninety million miles of space to the nearest reader capable of understanding English-I shall pass over the next several years without much more than a summary.

My lack of anything in the way of schooling proved a bit of an impediment. But Mr. Farley-now Assistant Professor Farley-serving in loco parentis, lined up enough tutors for a rash program. I proved, rather surprisingly to all, and especially to myself, an alert, bright student, and before long I was almost up to my age group. I had seen the interior of a schoolroom at last, and found it no less of a jungle in its way than the Matto Grosso had been. And the abstruse mysteries of long division were at last conquered.

Farley was teaching at Harvard, but somehow or other I ended up at Yale. I shall pass over these years briefly: they were happy years. I broke no fewer bones on the football field than do most undergraduates, and no fewer hearts in Lover's Lane, under the stimulus of a ripely golden Connecticut moon. Nor did my own heart escape without a fracture or two; but it's all part of the mystery of what philosophers call "growing up"-as if there was any other direction in which to grow!

Oddly enough-for all the heady pleasures of the football field-I found more intoxication in the feel of a rapier in my hands. Quite by chance I discovered a natural affinity for the sword, and for two years running I was captain of Yale's famed fencing team. This, too, like the color of my hair and eyes, was to prove an unexpected blessing when I came to wandering and warring through the black and crimson jungles of barbaric Thanator-but again I am ahead of my story.

Although I was an American citizen by now, the wanderlust had bitten too deep, had struck me too young, for the quiet academic life to hold many attractions for me. I yearned, always, to see what lay beyond the dim horizon . . . over the next range of hills . . . beyond the bright waters of the shining sea.

Before the ink was dry on my sheepskin, I was off. A hasty farewell to the Professor, and I began to wander. The next couple of years took me far and wide. The restlessness, the wanderlust I had inherited from my father took me about the globe. A brief stint of journalism in New York, then I shipped as an ordinary seaman on a merchant tub to Stockholm. I learned to fly in India, of all places, and this led to a bit of refugee-running out of Cuba, arms smuggling in the Near East, and a few flights of medicine and food supplies into blockaded Biafra.

I ended up in Vietnam, and when some technicality over my naturalization papers looked to keep me out of the fight, I joined the Red Cross as a pilot, running supplies and medics into the trouble spots. My thirst for adventure had frequently carried me into trouble from which my fighting instincts had, till now, rescued me without permanent damage. But in Vietnam, something happened . . .

The Viet Cong terrorists had made a strike at a small village and medical help was needed urgently. So urgently that they hauled me out of my billet on thirty minutes notice. I was to ride herd on a squad of

choppers flying in medics and food and flying out the seriously injured.

I had just spent a couple of weeks in Saigon on leave so I was fresh and rested, so to speak. My group was stationed at a temporary field hacked out of the brush on the outskirts of Hon Quan, which is about sixty-five miles north of Saigon and only some ten miles or so from the borders of Cambodia.

We were a half hour out of Hon Quan when my chopper began to develop a bad case of the chokes. Something was wrong with one of the fuel lines, probably a morsel of dirt that had clogged the line. The sort of thing a full mechanic's checkout would have spotted and corrected, but we had been scrambled on notice too short for a full-scale check.

And that meant I was in trouble. We didn't have the big two- and three-man combat choppers the American army used; on rescue missions like these all I had was a little one-man copter. The cargo craft were up ahead, needed to fly out the injured. So I was all by myself.

I radioed the rest of the squadron and told them my second-in-command would take over as I was having engine trouble and would probably fall behind. They went on ahead while I dropped back, trying to figure out what to do. We were flying over some of the densest jungles on earth and there was nowhere to sit her down safely. If I could find a flat space to sit her down I could probably fix the trouble in no time, even if I had to unscrew one of the lines and blow the obstruction out.

I circled for a while, hunting. There was a chance, a slim one, that the line would clear itself, but I couldn't count on it. If the motor conked out I would crash in the treetops. A chopper comes down slowly, even without power, because the air catches and turns the blades, braking the rate of fall. That's the nice thing about these flying eggbeaters.

The bad thing is you are flying too low to bail out with a parachute.

I began to sweat.

For a half-hour I played with that chopper like a virtuoso with a Bach concerto, getting every ounce of go-power I could squeeze from my laboring engine. I couldn't return to base because I knew there was no landing area between there and here, having just flown over the same piece of countryside. But-who could say? Off to the west a bit there might be a clearing. I nursed her carefully in that direction.

A while later I spotted a flash of light, the yellow-brown glisten of a jungle river. My chopper was fitted out with pontoon gear, of course. Half the land in this desolate corner of the globe is swamp and marsh. If I could make it to that river I could at least make a landing.

I began wondering just where I was. No river of that size should be in my neighborhood. I must have flown farther afield in my search for landing space than I had suspected.

Could it be the Mekong? If so, I was in trouble. The Mekong isn't in Vietnam at all, but over the border in Cambodia. It traverses eastern Cambodia from north to south and empties into the South China Sea. And Cambodia is a place we were not supposed to be. A so-called "neutral" country, its ruler, Prince Sihanouk, might be a jolly host to visiting American VIP's like Jackie Kennedy, but he was mighty inhospitable when it came to lost or strayed or crashed American pilots who violated what he laughingly called the neutrality of his borders-which the Cong are suspected to cross regularly.

But beggars cannot be choosers. Just as my chopper came over the broad, gliding floods of the jungle river, my exhausted engine gave one last strangled croak and died. The chopper fell like a stone. Then

the uprush of air caught the dead blades. They creaked and began to turn. The rate of descent lessened-not much, but just enough.

The muddy yellow river swung up to smash me like a flyswatter in the hand of a giant. Just before I hit I caught one fleeting glimpse of thick green jungle lining either bank like a solid wall. Then I smacked the water and everything went black.

Well, as Carmody, the guy who taught me how to fly in India, used to say, any landing you can walk away from is a good one. I have a hunch even Carmody would not have thought much of the way I hit that river. Yellow-brown water smashed over the bubble canopy as we hit the surface with a jolt that knocked me against the panel. When I came to I had a cut on my brow streaming blood. I ached all over like one big bruise. But I was alive, at least.

But that belly flop had sprung leaks in both pontoons and they were filling up fast. I tore off my safety harness and inflated a rubber raft. Then I grabbed the emergency gear, prepacked in a knapsack for just such a spot, and got out.

The knapsack was packed with everything from snakebite serum to signal flares, and it made a bulky package. I wrestled it into the bobbing raft and climbed out dizzily. One pontoon was underwater already and the chopper was riding at a forty-degree angle, just about to slide under. I pushed away from the pontoon with one paddle, backed water a bit, and sat glumly, watching my one link with civilization go under. Then I roused myself and took a sour look around at the depressing scenery. The jungle was packed, green and thick, on either side of the river. It looked unpleasant. But with the raft I could get downriver and maybe be lucky enough to find a settlement of some kind. I began to paddle a bit, but the river whipped right along and I didn't need to work very hard to keep moving.

Pretty soon I was soaked with sweat and busy keeping off the bugs. The air was thick and soupy and hot. It stank of stagnant water and rotting vegetation and slimy mud, but I wouldn't have traded that river for the jungle. I could stand flies and stink and sweat, but the jungles hereabouts are somewhat less wholesome. They are crawling with unfriendly creatures, of which cobras are only one variety. Not to mention tigers and wild boar and elephants. I would take my chances with the river.

After a while, I sat and rested aching arms and sourly watched endless jungle whip by on either side of me. The Cambodian jungles are among the world's least hospitable places, thick with teak and dense bamboo and rubbery rhododendron bushes, the ground a sloppy quagmire of knee-deep leaf mold and greasy mud. I had carried off a machete from the helicopter, but I had no desire to have to use it. Let the river current do the work, was my motto. If worst came to worst, I was perfectly willing to simply glide downstream all the way to the sea.

I began to do some serious thinking about where I was. Our base at Hon Quan was some ten miles or so on the other side of the Cambodian border, but the Mekong itself lay farther away. I cudged my memory, trying to picture the maps I had seen. There was a map case in the bubble canopy, and a compass as well, but I had gotten out of the chopper so fast they had been left behind.

Could this be the Mekong? As far as I could remember, the Mekong at its closest point to the border lay some fifty miles northwest of Hon Quan. Was it possible I had flown that far afield while searching for a spot to bring her down safely? Well . . . it was possible, but just barely. A chopper eats up the miles unobtrusively. I could have come that far, but I wondered: could this be another river? I recalled to mind the maps of Cambodia that I had studied. In the center lay something called the Tonle Sap, the Great Lake. This, I vaguely remembered, was supposed to have been the last shrinking remnant of a mighty prehistoric sea. Lots of rivers fed into it: I might have crashlanded on one of these tributaries and not on

the Mekong. In which case, God alone knew where I was being carried by the swift gliding current of the muddy waters.

It was late afternoon by now and getting dark. The startlingly sudden night of the jungle was coming down across the sky. And here was another problem. Up to now I had been kept busy not so much by paddling, for the current was very swift, but by the necessity of shoving my rubber raft clear of half-sunken teak-wood logs and other river debris. All I needed was to brush up against one of those half-submerged snags. My raft would tear and sink in seconds. Then I would really have problems!

But how could I continue keeping the raft clear of snags when the impenetrable darkness of the jungle night closed down over the river? As it would be doing before very much longer

I decided on the only course that seemed advisable, and began to put in towards the nearer shore. I would just have to take my chances on spending the night in the jungle, and push on down river with dawn.

It was tough work breaking free of the rushing current, and it was pitch dark by the time I came to shore. I got out, my boots sinking to the knee in the foulsmelling mud, and dragged the lightweight raft up out of the water. It was marshy and soft on this part of the bank, and I fought my way through tall stiff grasses up to solid land, tying the raft securely to the limb of a fallen tree.

Then I sat down on the log and made a meal of sorts out of the emergency rations, washing it down with a swig of fresh water from one of the canteens. I was thirsty enough from the sweltering heat of my river journey to drink the whole canteen, but I knew that would be most unwise. It might be days before I came to a riverfront town or settlement, and I would need every drop of my water supplies. I had half a pack of cigarettes, so I rationed them as well. I sat and smoked and batted flies and watched the stars come out by the score. They burned bright and fierce against the night, like fistfuls of blue-white diamonds strewn across black velvet.

It was a beautiful sight, but I was in no mood to appreciate beauty just then. I began to wonder how I was supposed to sleep. I could lie down on the ground and take my chances with the cobras, or I could curl up in the rubber raft. But the raft would hardly be a barrier to any really determined cobra, and anyway there were other creatures infesting these jungles who might be inclined to come down to the barks of the river for a little drink.

The only alternative was to climb a tree and find a comfortable crotch. Then all I would have to worry about was falling asleep-and falling out. But it was too dark to see clearly and most of the trees nearby were unclimbable.

And then I saw the light.

It shone in the heavens above like a pale beacon. I froze, snuffing out my cigarette in the leaf mold, wondering about Viet Cong. Who else would have a searchlight operating in these jungles? If this was Cambodia, there certainly could be no friendly American camp nearby.

And I began to sweat again.

I was in enough trouble already without falling into enemy hands. I had seen some examples of what happened to Americans during "interrogation" at the hands of the Viet Cong. I began to wish I had kept going on the river awhile longer.

The light shone on. It was pallid and ghostly, a stationary pillar of faint light standing up against the stars. It seemed to waver rhythmically. It throbbed. It pulsed like a beating heart. My curiosity became overwhelming. And I knew that I could never dare sleep this close to whatever was making that jungle beacon without satisfying my curiosity. I had to discover the cause of this mystery.

Whatever was causing the light was not very far inland from the river. A few hundred yards at most.

Surely, if I watched my step, I could make my way close enough to the source of the weird pulsing column of light. I resolved to try, anyway.

Taking up my machete and slinging the pack across my shoulder, I started straight for it. I went slowly and tried to be as careful as possible, to avoid making any more noise than was necessary. But I really didn't have to worry about the noise my passage made as I squeezed through the thick underbrush. For the whole jungle had come alive around me with the onset of darkness. For night is the jungle's day. The big predators are afoot, and the little scuttling things scurry through the brush seeking food and water. Only the monkeys sleep in the trees above, huddled together along the branches.

With every step my boots sank to the ankle and sometimes halfway to the knee in the slimy mulch of decaying leaves and reeking mud. I wormed through thick groves of bamboo and crept through gigantic rhododendron bushes. Their rubbery leaves swished against my face and slapped my shoulders. I hoped I would not disturb a sleeping boar. Or, for that matter, one of the slithering reptiles that infested this rotting hellhole.

Soon the light became dimly visible through the densely packed trees. It waxed and waned like a living thing of light. I paused from time to time to listen. No sound of diesel engines, no guttural Viet Cong voices, no chatter of radio static. Just the slap and wash of the river against the reedy shore, the rustle of small things sliding through the leaves, the thousand little ordinary sounds of the jungle.

I pushed forward, and came to the edge of a clearing. And stopped dead in my tracks, staring.

Before me, rising tier on tier out of the swampy bush, were the crumbling ramparts of an old stone city. Conical towers, covered with carved faces and wreathed with jungle vines, loomed up into the darkness.

I had stumbled upon a lost city, buried for ages in the jungles of Cambodia.

2. THE GATE BETWEEN THE WORLDS

To this very hour I can remember the thrill of shock that went through me as I first gazed upon the gates of the dead city. I can remember catching my breath with amazement, and the prickle of awe that roughened my skin and tingled at my nape as I stared at the uncanny spectacle that lay before me, drenched in the silver glamor of a brilliant moon.

The very unexpectedness of the discovery added to the air of the supernatural that hung about that timeless moment. One moment ago I had been worming my way through the dense black jungle, and in the next I stood before the frowning gates of a fantastic stone city left over from another age!

The transition was so miraculous, so swift, so unexpected, that it was as if some unseen magician had conjured the city into being before my eyes. Still, frozen, timeless, bathed in the mystery of moonlight, the city seemed an apparition. I thought of the glimmering mirages of the desert, and of that persistent image of an unknown city the Italian mariners have seen for centuries, hovering above the waters of the Straits of Messina-Fata Morgana, the superstitious fisherfolk call the floating mirage, and to this day the scientists have yet to solve the baffling mystery of the illusion that has haunted those Straits from the age of the Crusaders to this day.

Strange and very beautiful was this unknown and ruined metropolis of the Cambodian jungles that lay before me. I stood, frozen with awe, my nerves prickling with the cold premonition of the supernatural, almost as if in another breath I expected the moonlit ruins to evaporate into darkness-to vanish as swiftly and as mysteriously as they had flickered into being.

There were conical and many-sided stone towers that loomed up into the star-gemmed sky, their sides heavy with sculpted faces that glared down at me with blind eyes. Walls were thickly graven with weird hieroglyphic symbols in a tongue unknown to me, perhaps unknown and unreadable by any living man. What lost wisdom, what forgotten science, what mysterious lore, lay hidden in those huge and cryptic symbols?

Well did I know that the trackless jungles of old Cambodia were whispered as the haunt of legend and marvel and mystery. I had heard of the baffling stone ruins which lay far to the north-the jungle-grown cities and temples known as Angkor Vat and Angkor Thom. For untold centuries the jungle had concealed those colossal ruins, those vinegrown temples left over from the mysterious reign of the little-known Khmer race who had so curiously vanished from the face of the earth ages before. Was this mystery metropolis yet another monument abandoned in unknown antiquity by the strange and forgotten people we knew only as the Khmer? Lost in the unexplored jungles, had I stumbled across the threshold of an age-old secret city left behind in time's remotest dawn?

The stone gates towered before me, covered with weird glyphs. From the lintel above the arch, a heavy face of cold sandstone stared down at me with an enigmatic expression. Controlling a little shiver of uncanny awe, I stared back at that stone mask. Broad cheeks, flat nose, thick lips, wide glaring eyes-it was not a face of smiling welcome, that much was certain.

Was it a trick of moonlight and shadow, or did the faint trace of a mocking smile lurk in the dim, shadowed corners of those stone lips? Was it an illusion of my overstrained imagination, or did I glimpse the flicker of an impersonal, aloof intelligence in those wide and staring eyes, and-a chill, remote amusement?

What secret lore of unknown antiquity lay hidden behind the frozen smile of that guardian deity or demon whose face was set high above the gates of the lost city? In the cold glory of the moonlight, the stone metropolis was like a labyrinth, all black inky shadow and faint rose sandstone.

A rose-red city, half as old as time

Unbidden, my memory conjured up that famous line from the old poem. Dimly I recalled that John William Burgon, the author of that poem, had been writing about the stone city of Petra in the deserts of Arabia. No matter: the line fit here just as well.

Almost without volition, my feet had carried me through those frowning portals, beneath the enigma of that stone guardian with its mocking smile, and into the rubbish-choked courtyard that lay beyond.

All about me rose a forest of megalithic stone towers, built of colossal blocks hewn from solid sandstone the color of pale coral or of the faint skies of early dawn glimpsed over the gliding floods of the Orinoco. Whatever elder wisdom this vanished race had possessed, they certainly knew the secrets of stone construction. Blocks of stone weighing tons apiece were so closely fitted together to build these soaring walls and tapering spires that they needed no concrete to hold them firm. And measureless centuries of wind and rain had dislodged but few of the great building stones.

I remembered that when the French explorer and naturalist Mouhot, the first to stumble upon the vast ruins of Angkor to the north, had questioned the natives about the mystery cities, they told him they were the work of many-armed giants. It had been Pra-Eun, sorcerer-king of the Dawn Age, who had commanded captive titans to raise the walls of the ancient city. Gazing now upon these mighty towers and megalithic bastions, I could well believe them to be the work of primal colossi enslaved by some mighty magician from an unknown age.

I could not resist the urge of my curiosity, and began to explore the ruined metropolis. I prowled through stone-paved streets, down long galleries where weird and monstrous caryatids bore up stone architraves carved with snarling devilmasks and beaked demons. Time hung heavy here; its invisible weight pressed on my soul. There was an almost palpable aura of an immense and unbelievable antiquity that hung about these moldering ruins from time's dawn. I felt the shudder of superstitious awe go through me. It was as if I walked through a shadowy necropolis where gods themselves lay buried; as if with every step I risked awakening mummified wizards or unseen guardians who had slumbered the ages away, and into whose time-haunted precincts mine was the first intruder's step.

Who were the mysterious Khmer kings who had built these sprawling metropoli of ancient stone? Where had they gone, leaving behind this wilderness of carved stone, the haunt of shadows and silence, a kingdom given over to the whispering dominion of the patient spider? And I thought of the lost and ocean-whelmed cities of elder Atlantis and prehistoric Mu . . . of the stone enigma of the Ponape ruins, which A. Merritt had described in the opening pages of his great romance, *The Moon Pool*.

With every step I ventured deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of aeon-lost and time-forgotten mysteries. A fragment of a verse by Clark Ashton Smith came to my memory:

. . . search, in cryptic galleries, The void sarcophagi, the broken urns
Of many a vanished avatar; Or haunt the gloom of crumbling pylons vast
In temples that enshrine the shadowy past.

Were these dim colonnades and glyphic walls and megalithic temples the work of the long-lost Khmer kings? I knew the remains of Angkor Vat were among the most curious and baffling ruins on earth, and that science has for many years sought to solve the enigma of their antiquity. But I knew, as well, that the vast stone wreckage of Angkor lay far to the north of this place, in the jungles north of the Tonle Sap, on the right banks of the river Siem Reap, a tributary of which fed into the great lake at Cambodia's heart. Never had I heard of any mysterious ruined cities this far south-unless

Could this stone city be long-lost, legendary Arangkor itself, the primal city from which the mighty line of the Khmer kings had sprung in mythic aeons before the beginning of time? I knew something of the weird epic literature of this mystery-haunted corner of oldest Asia; science had never found the lost and secret city wherein the first of the Khmer kings had arisen to rule the dawn age. Could this shadowy city of moonlight and silence be the fabulous and antique Arangkor? Why, even the Khmer themselves had forgotten the whereabouts of the cradle of their own race .

. . . long-lost and legended Arangkor, Thou age-forgotten City of the Dawn, Wherein doth stand the

Gate Between The Worlds, Handwork of ancient Gods whose very names Are long since silence on the lips of men

Dim and tall, a column of throbbing radiance thrust above the lost city into the star-gemmed sky.

Enthralled in the crumbling mystery of lost Arangkor (as in my heart I somehow knew this forgotten city to be), I had forgotten the beacon of pulsing light that had caught my attention in the jungle, and which had called me to the stone gates of the ruined metropolis like a beckoning finger of lambent light.

Now, as I glimpsed it above the conical towers, I remembered how I had come here to investigate that light. And instantly caution awoke within me. I had, for some unknown length of time, been prowling the rubbish-choked avenues and squares of the dead city, careless of the noise my boots made, not thinking it possible that ruins of such evident neglect and antiquity could be inhabited.

But now I froze, cursing my carelessness. That throbbing beam of mysterious light was no natural phenomenon, surely. Some stranger shared the lonely streets of the dead city with me, and it was yet to be determined if he were friend or foe!

I went forward more cautiously now, watching every step, my machete in my hand like a sword.

The pillar of pulsing luminance rose from the very center of lost Arangkor. As I made my way towards that glowing beacon, I puzzled over its cause and purpose. Straight up into the midnight sky it blazed, that ray of pale light that throbbed and flickered and throbbed. Looking up, I saw the yellow spark of distant Jupiter directly overhead. I thought nothing of this at the time.

I came at last into a great stone-paved plaza at the very heart of the deserted city.

Stone colossi squatted in a vast ring about that which lay at the center of this plaza. Tailor-fashion they sat, raising many arms, hands clutching meaningless attributes, skulls, keys, flowers, wheels, swords, and stylized thunderbolts. Heavy stone faces glared inward to the unknown thing at the center of the circle of gods: some howled, some smiled, some wept, some leered, and some looked down at the source of the column of radiance with the placid and immobile features of a Buddha.

Nowhere could I see a sign of life, although my eyes searched the shadows that clung about the bases of the circle of stone gods.

I went forward between two of the stone titans and looked at last upon the source of the mysterious light. A gasp broke from my lips.

In the very center of the great plaza, encircled by the towering carven gods, lay-a well!

Wide was the mouth of this well; a man could fall therein with ease; and that it descended to a very great depth I did not question. Sunk deep in the stone pave was this curious well, and its margin was a thick lip of some pallid translucent stone that reminded me of milky jade, although were that lucent substance truly jade, the mineral must have been the most gigantic piece of worked jade known to archaeology. Fifteen feet across from side to side the mouth of the great well stretched, and the lip of the well was ten feet broad, set flush with the stone floor of the plaza. The imagination reels, imagining the boulder that had yielded up so huge a single slab of the semiprecious mineral. A very mountain of jade would have been required! For I could see no jointure in all that flawless circle of milky stone: incredible, almost impossible, but it was all o f one piece.

Up from the mouth of the jade well the mighty beam of radiance shone. Fifteen feet across, the throbbing pillar of luminance sprang into the night sky, pointing, as it seemed, at the distant spark of Jupiter.

The column of light had only the faintest suggestion of color. Dull white, a cold hue as of moonbeams, the colossal ray rose up from the bottom of the world to fling a shining spear against the citadels of the stars.

Rhythmically, a wave of sparkling gold ascended the luminous shaft of that beam of pallid radiance. A mist of gold-dust, a calyx of powdered gold, a tissue of flickering, gemmy golden sparks-I blinked in fascination and awe at the mysterious phenomenon. The ripples of gold light were what gave the illusion that the shaft of light dimmed and grew brighter, dimmed and again grew brighter. The secret of the throbbing rhythm I had glimpsed from afar was solved-one mystery, at least!

For when the wave of sparkling gold particles went gliding up the dim shaft of the beam, the beam seemed brighter through the added brilliance of the fiery mist.

But what were those rising flakes of golden fire? What unseen and unimaginable lamp deep in the bowels of the planet thrust forth this shining beacon against the stars? And why?

Incautiously, I stepped forward to investigate this luminous enigma.

As I stepped out on the shimmering ring of milky jade, I lost my footing. For the lucent substance was as slick as oiled glass!

I fell headlong, my machete flying, the knapsack slipping from my shoulders to thud against the sleekstone.

And now I saw something I had not noticed earlier. The broad ring of milky, luminous stone was ever so slightly concave.

The jade lip of this mysterious well sloped inward towards the mouth, and I was helplessly sliding into the throbbing beam of light that speared up against the midnight sky!

My palms struck out but slid futilely, unable to stay my progress. Frantically I groped for a handhold, but there was none that I could find or feel.

Feet first, I slid into the golden, pulsing glory of the ray

Strange-strange beyond words-is the uncanny experience I must next relate.

My vague, distorted memories of that flashing and timeless moment are blurred and meaningless.

For months I have pondered over the sensory record stamped in my mind. At length I believe I have pieced together some explanation of what followed as I slid down the sloping mouth of that mysterious well, straight into the throbbing beam of luminance. Perhaps my imagination has contributed something to the account I must give you now; perhaps remembered fragments from a hundred science fiction stories I have read have gone into the crucible of memory, and result in the following description of that which cannot adequately be described. If so, so be it! But here, as accurately as I can picture the experience in the inadequate medium of written words, is what seemed to occur.

A blinding light enveloped my body.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the awful brightness, but to no avail! The blaze of radiance pierced through me. I could feel it beating against my flesh. I could feel it warm against my very bones, like desert sunlight.

Then all bodily sensation left me. Numb, I seemed to float like a cloud of insubstantial vapor amid a glory of dazzling light. But-no-a ghost of sensation filtered to me through the shining splendor.

I felt a storm of fiery particles beating against naked flesh. The particles I had seen before-the flakes of golden fire that swept up the column of the ray? I cannot say; I will never know.

Like a drumming hail they beat upon me from beneath, and I felt myself rising, rising up that column of shining glory . . . faster and ever faster, until my velocity became a soundless rush of hurricane force.

I could not see, I could not speak. I felt bodiless, devoid of substance, without weight. A ghost of streaming mist, impelled upwards by some unthinkable force, I hurtled into the sky.

Had the unknown radiance, in some manner inexplicable to me, sundered the bonds of interatomic energy, the binding force that holds matter together? Was I now but a dematerialized cloud of racing neutrons and electrons, driven up that beam of radiant force by some ionic thrust?

Science would scoff at the thought. But I know of no other explanation whereby to explain the inexplicable.

Now I was vaguely conscious of intensest cold-a supra-arctic cold such as might lie in the dark abyss between the stars.

There was a moment of utter blackness.

A sensation of incredible speed, as though I now traveled faster than light itself.

The cold bit deep-the blackness closed about me-I flew like a meteor through unguessable immensities at the speed of thought itself.

Ahead of me I caught one flashing glimpse-incredible sight! A colossal, banded globe of brown and orange flame, with a cyclopean eye of fire!

A cold, dead orb of jagged rock swung towards me, like the frozen, airless satellite of some planetary giant.

For a single flashing instant I stared down-or up? -at splintered mountains of frozen black rock-valleys of frozen blue methane snow-a jumbled, jagged, wintry wilderness in which a man could not survive for a second.

Then the features of the frozen stone orb hurtling towards me with unthinkable velocity blurred.

Changed-in a miraculous transformation)

I caught one single swift flying glimpse of thick jungles, shining rivers, cloud-crested mountains, glittering barbaric cities-and the next instant I felt as if the walls of the universe had closed with a deafening crash upon the flying mote of light that was myself.

And I knew no more.

3. WORLD OF MANY MOONS

Nature is, in many ways, a merciful mother. When the flesh of her puny children has endured shock upon shock to the very limits of the intolerable, she extends to them the benison of unconsciousness.

From a heavy coma, I awoke slowly.

Awoke to a torpor of body and soul—a languor that lapped me soothingly in its folds. For a long while I simply lay without thought or feeling, in a dim stupor like the aftereffect of some powerful narcotic. I lay flat on my back against some slick, cool stone surface, staring up at the moons in the dim golden sky. Sleepily I blinked at the three shining moons in the darkly golden sky above me.

Something clamored in my mind for attention. But it felt too good to lie here motionless and numb. So I firmly closed my mind against the intrusion of unwanted thoughts and idly gazed at the triple-mooned sky of golden vapor—for now I could see that it was indeed vapor, a crawling, curdled film of dim gold light that wrinkled and glided and whorled and eddied above my head like foam on the surface of a disturbed pool, or the coiling and panchromatic arabesque of an oil slick on the pavements of New York.

There was something about that sky that obscurely troubled my placid semiconsciousness. A sky, I reasoned, ought not to be gold vapor, but some other color—blue?

I could not remember.

But there should not, I felt most definitely, be three moons aloft in that strange sky. And especially not such moons as these. For moons should be pallid white, not like these three monstrous orbs, one of which was cold lime green, the second dim rose, and the third a luminous blend of azure and silver.

And then I woke fully, tingling with shock as if a drenching gush of ice-cold water had sluiced my naked body from head to heel

My naked body?

Wildly, I cast an involuntary glance down at myself and saw that I was bare as a new-born babe. I stared around me at the broad disk of milky jade whereon I had lain upon awakening, the broad disk of jade that lay athwart a field of thick-leaved grass that was the crimson of fresh blood

A gold sky—three moons—and crimson grass!

I sprang to my feet with an inarticulate cry, and reeled, staggering for a moment. My body felt numb, as if the circulation had been suspended in every extremity. Pins and needles lanced through me with excruciating pain as the circulation began. I lurched to the edge of the milky disk of stone and fell sprawling in that springy field of thick-leaved grass that was so impossibly crimson.

Panting, my heart racing with shock, I stared around me wildly.

From dreamless sleep I had awakened into-nightmare!

The jade disk was ringed about with nine towering monoliths-featureless pillars of dark, smooth stone. All about, a field of heavy-bladed crimson grass stretched away. To one side it sloped down to a gurgling stream some fifty yards below.

Behind me, and to my right, a wall of dense foliage blocked my view of whatever lay beyond-a heavy jungle, but like no jungle I had ever seen. For the trunks of the trees, and the branches, even to the most minute twigs, were black-black as any velvet -and gnarled and twisted into knotted, malformed shapes unlike any terrene trees with which I was familiar.

And the leafage of those trees was, again, that impossible, incredible, fantastic crimson!

It was a scene of nightmarish strangeness and phantasmagoric beauty, like something from the dreams of a painter like Hieronymus Bosch, or Hannes Bok.

And yet it was real! There was no question of that. Every detail of the scene lay clear and sharply defined before me, limned in the triple brilliance of those impossibly huge, fantastically colored moons. No dream or vision, no illusion or hallucination, could possibly have sustained such a detailed and lucid reality.

Another thought struck me as I lay there, my stunned mind striving to grapple with the impossible scenes that lay to every hand.

Could it be that I was-dead? And that this weird world of uncanny beauty and strangeness was the Afterlife? I uttered a mocking burst of laughter. Perhaps . . . perhaps . . . but, if that were so, the religions of my world were thoroughly wrong in their conceptions of the Afterlife, for this weird place of black, monstrous trees, golden sky and triple moons, and blood-colored vegetation, this was neither Hell nor Heaven, Purgatory nor Limbo.

It didn't look much like Valhalla should, or any other world that myth described beyond the portals of life and death.

These first few moments of my life on the surface of Thanator (as I later discovered to be the name by which its strange natives called their curious world) are a blur to me. But I know this: I never for one moment entertained any serious doubt as to the state of my sanity. Never once did I really question that what I saw about me was not actual but some sort of dream or hallucination.

I knew that I was alive, sane, and that the scenery about me was a real place, no figment of a mind driven into the refuge of madness. I could feel the crimson blades of grass tickling the soles of my bare feet; I could feel the warm sunlight (or what I took to be sunlight) beating upon my bare body; a slight breeze stirred the unruly locks of yellow hair that fell over my brow, and passed invisible hands over my nakedness. My nostrils drank in the unfamiliar spicy aroma of jungle growths such as I had never seen or heard of before. My ears heard the faint clashing of thorny-edged leaves struck together in the light wind, the gurgling of the brook below, the coughing grunt of some unknown creature of the jungles.

This world was real. And I-however I had come here-was here.

I examined myself curiously.

Every article of clothing had somehow been stripped from my body. Even my underwear, my socks, the wristwatch on my arm, the ring on my right index finger, given to me when I was a boy by my father on some forgotten birthday-everything I had worn was gone.

Putting my hand to my chest, I discovered that the identification tags which had hung about my neck on a chain were also missing.

Most baffling of all: I'd cut my thigh on a tool a day or two ago, and had affixed an adhesive bandage to the cut.

The cut, half-healed, was still there. But the bandage was-gone!

Memories came tumbling back to me now, as if the shock of these discoveries had driven everything else from my mind, making room for the recent past. I remembered the helicopter crash on the Mekong, the trek through the Cambodian jungles, the way I had stumbled by accident upon the lost city, the pillar of throbbing light into which I had fallen

Could it be-

That ancient verse from one of the old epics of Indochina, that reference to Arangkor

Wherein doth stand the Gate Between The Worlds

It was fantastic, incredible-like something out of the wildest, most imaginative piece of science fiction ever written, but-could it be? Was that beam of throbbing radiance that flung up against the cold glitter of the stars some weird means of transportation between worlds-some surviving mechanism of an elder science otherwise lost to the knowledge of man?

Almost instantly my mind came up with a term-transporter beam. I recalled the sensory illusions of speed and flight across dark and frigid immensities at frightful speed-the sensation of being not solid heavy matter, but a dematerialized cloud of electrons.

It was a staggering conception. All I had ever read about the mysterious scientific wizardry of lost and legendary peoples of the Dawn Age came tumbling back to me. Ancient Atlantis, whose glittering cities the green throat of the sea drank down before history began-primal Mu, whispered of in dark surviving myths-Lost Lemuria, whose colossal stone cities are long since submerged beneath the mighty waves of the Pacific, save for the cryptic ruins on Ponape and the huge, enigmatic stone faces that stare forever out to sea from the legend-haunted, lonely hilltops of Easter Island

Did the Ancients possess the secret of transmitting matter across space?

Had I stumbled onto the secret of a lost science forgotten for uncounted aeons?

Was there a network of intangible pathways linking the planets together? Pathways of unknown force down which one could travel at unthinkable velocities to materialize upon the face of another world?

If so, what world was I on? What planet of the solar system had three moons?

I cudgeled my wits, remembering that Mercury and Venus were not known to have any satellites. Mars,

I remembered, had two moons called Deimos and Phobos-it was no use: no planet known to me had three great moons to light its golden skies!

After a while I went down that sloping crimson lawn to bathe my face in the rushing stream below.

In a world of weird and terrifying strangeness, it was curiously heartening and gratifying to discover that water was still-water. Cold and pure, the water of this stream, as I drank from cupped hands, tasted no different from the water I had drunk from a score of jungle rivers back on Earth.

I went back up the hill to investigate the black and crimson jungle. It was thick and dark and I did not care to venture within its depths. There was no telling what savage predators might roam those gloomy aisles -and I had no weapons.

Neither did I care to squeeze through that thick foliage unclothed. The thick, broad leaves were edged with sharp, thorny serrations like a saw blade. My naked body would show the red trace of those razory thorns before I had penetrated a yard-and who could say what unknown venom such leaves might secrete?

Yet I could not stand in this place forever.

And the sky was darkening now. The gold vapor dimmed. The luster of the three immense moons brightened slowly, like goblin lanterns. I resolved to explore the edge of the jungle, and began walking.

I had become aware of two curious facts.

One was that the gravitation of this planet was the same as the gravitation of the world on which I had been born, or very similar. This suggested that the red and black planet must be nearly the same size as Earth -which seemed impossible. For, unless I had incorrectly read my astronomy text in college, the only planet in the solar system that is anywhere close to the size of our own world is cloud-wrapped, moonless Venus.

And the three moons that lit the darkening skies reduced to zero any chance of this planet being Venus.

The other fact was the air. I had been breathing it now for half an hour. I felt no ill affects there-from; in fact, the air seemed to be the same as Earth's atmosphere-perhaps a bit fresher, perhaps even a bit richer in oxygen.

And my astronomy classes had given me to understand that no other planet in our solar system had an atmosphere breathable by human lungs. Mars, they said, had a cold rarefied atmosphere like that of the crest of Everest; the outer planets were supposedly wrapped in smothering blankets of poisonous methane and ammonia.

But my chest rose and fell calmly, and I breathed this air without discomfort.

It was a mystery, and but one of the myriad that surrounded my experiences thus far. I gave over as fruitless the attempt to puzzle it out, and resolved to wait for further data.

Night had fallen now, and with the advent of darkness came new mysteries-and a marvel beyond comprehension.

Glancing up, I glimpsed a fourth moon ascending above the horizon! It was very small and faint,

compared to the three great orbs whose multicolored light illuminated the darkness-but it was visibly a disk, and adrift on the tides of night.

I could think of no planet with four moons. Did this mean the mysterious transporter beam, as I called it, had hurled me beyond the limits of the solar system into the orbit of some unknown planet which revolved about a distant star? .

The answer to this new riddle was very swift and definite!

As I prowled along the margin of the dark jungle, the world about me was suddenly illuminated by a rich red glow that lit the sky like some unthinkable colossal explosion.

I turned to witness this new marvel and cried out in my astonishment.

Above the horizon a titanic arch of brilliance rose into view.

The fifth moon, if moon this was, must be either unthinkable huge or incredibly close to the planet whereon I stood-for the arch of its sphere bisected a considerable span of the dark horizon. If any body so huge were so close, it was difficult to understand why the gravitational forces did not bring the two globes together in a terrible collision.

As I watched, I became aware of an incredible fact. The arch of light was broadening visibly. As it rose steadily in the skies of this jungle world, instead of rounding into a globe, it became ever more obvious that this new fifth moon was even larger than I had at first imagined.

More and more of this luminous globe arose above the horizon. Now it seemed almost to occupy one-quarter of the visible horizon!

I stared at this astounding vista with an awe so vast and thrilling as to be beyond description.

No stargazer of ancient Babylon, no great astronomer in his mighty observatory, has ever looked upon such a marvel of the skies as rose before me now. ‘

Brilliant beyond belief, vast beyond comprehension, beautiful beyond dreams, the titanic globe rose at last fully above the horizon. Its surface was banded with horizontal zones, and an infinity of colors made it radiant with hues. Vast portions of its surface were colored an indescribably beautiful peach. Stripes of brown and glowing amber, rich orange and luminous ocher, brick-red and velvety purplish gray marked off the surface of the colossal glowing shield into ten belts or zones, of which the central or equatorial belt was easily twice the width of the others.

And burning like an unholy blemish, like a colossal pit of flame, the southern hemisphere bore into view a terrible glaring crimson eye.

And I knew now where I was.

This was not the unknown planet of some distant star.

There was no mistaking that brown and yellow-banded giant with his glaring Red Spot.

The mysterious beam of force had transported me to the surface of one of the twelve moons of Jupiter.

Suddenly, a hissing snarl arrested my attention. The bestial sound had come from the edge of the jungle. Although I could see nothing but gnarled, ebon trees and crimson, fanged foliage, I knew that they concealed a prowling predator. I felt the pressure of unseen, burning eyes upon me.

And it came to me that I was in deadly danger. I had been acting like a fool-wandering about this enchanted landscape like an awestruck dreamer, when I would have been far wiser to have sought to return to my own world at once.

That disklike stone that lay amid the ring of columns like some great altar-was it not fashioned of the same sleek, lucent jade as the mouth of the mysterious well in far-off Arangkor? The transporter beam, or whatever it was, must be a link between this strange world and that lost city in the jungles of Cambodia. If I were to stand in the center of that circle of monoliths, would I not make the return journey to the world of my birth?

I turned and began to run for the Gate Between The Worlds, but it was too late.

Again the air resounded to that terrible hissing cry, and now a fantastic beast out of nightmare came crashing through the crimson foliage directly towards me.

Imagine a saber-toothed tiger crossed with some colossal reptile from prehistoric ages, and you will have an image of the thing that came hurtling from the underbrush with eyes of blazing yellow flame. It had a lithe, catlike body that rippled with steely strength. But instead of the striped fur of a jungle cat its sinewy length was clad in serpent scales. Bright emerald green was this scaly hide, paling to tawny yellow at the belly plates. Its feet were armed with bird claws, and a jagged line of sharp-edged spikes ran down its spine to the very tip of the lashing snakelike tail.

The monster's head was a snarling mask of fanged horror. Fierce cold eyes of lambent yellow flame were riveted upon my running figure. Giving voice to another hissing roar, the incredible thing flashed after me. And I was running for my life!

Strange unlikely thoughts pass through a man's mind when he stands on the brink of eternity. The thought that passed through mine was that that fanged horror, that sinewy engine of destruction, armed with that bladed, whiplike tail and saw-toothed spine, must be a predator of dread and all-but-invincible ferocity. Yet how cleverly nature had given a measure of protection to her weaker children on this strange and awful world, for that glittering scaly hide of emerald mail could not well slink hidden through the underbrush of the jungle, whose crimson foliage would clash with the green-scaled cat-thing! Thus the monster must depend, not upon camouflage, but the speed of an irresistible charge to secure its meat.

I later learned that the thing at my heels was the fearsome yathrib, the savage dragon-cat of the Thanatorian jungles-deadlier by far even than the prehistoric sabertooth of my native world.

I ran like the wind, but the yathrib was almost upon me before I had covered half the distance to the circle of stone pillars and the jade disk of the Gate. I could feel the hot breath panting against my bare legs as I ran. Another few yards, and my adventures on this amazing world would come to an abrupt and gory finish

And then, charging up the slope of the hill along whose crest I raced for the haven of the Gate stone came a party of even more incredible beings!

At first, so swiftly were events moving, I had no time to look at them clearly. I cast a hasty glance at strange, pale, attenuated figures clad in some glistening armor and mounted upon weird steeds like

wingless and gigantic birds-then the foremost of the gaunt riders reined up in my path and loosed an arrow from the great war bow it held in lean, glistening arms.

Behind me I heard a choking grunt. Then, as I swerved aside to avoid running full into the mounted figures, I struck a root with my bare foot and fell on the crimson turf. At any second I expected to feel the claws of that fanged horror at my heels ripping my flesh. But nothing happened.

I rolled over, sprang nimbly to my feet, and saw the yathrib squirming and wriggling amid the grasses, clawing with its hind legs at a terrible black arrow that thrust from the very base of its soft unprotected throat!

The pale attenuated rider had slain the beast even as it had reared erect to pull me down!

The grim shaft was all of a yard long-hewn, no doubt, from the same black wood as formed the gnarled and twisted trees of the jungle behind me. With incredible skill, the armored rider had struck the yathrib in what I later learned to be its only vulnerable spot-the soft tissues at the base of the throat, where the tough emerald mail did not protect the vital organs.

Even as I watched, the dragon-cat belched a fetid flood of black gore from between its fanged jaws, twitched once or twice, and stiffened in death.

Shakily, I turned to thank my rescuers. And as I did so, something like a lasso settled about my shoulders, slid down my upper arms, and was tightened with a jerk. The leader of the mounted band had flung it from a slim tube. Now lie tightened his grip on the cord and pulled. I was flung prone on the crimson grass, my arms held helplessly at my sides.

Grim irony. I had been rescued from the yathrib's slaving jaws-only to be taken prisoner by my very rescuer!

Dismounting, he bent over me, uttering harsh metallic words in some unknown tongue. I caught a vague glimpse of an inhuman visage-an expressionless mask of glistening silver-gray horn, like the shell of a gigantic crab-huge eyes like flashing black jewels-and a strange, sharp, medicinal odor that seemed vaguely familiar came to my nostrils from his slender form.

He seemed struck with the color of my hair and eyes, for although I could not understand the words of his clacking, guttural speech, his horny hand touched my hair again and again, and one horny finger lightly touched my eyelid.

The next moment I was swung up into the air and found myself face downward behind the saddle, dangling over the feathery cruppers of the strange bird-horse he rode. Then my captor swung astride, jerked the reins about, and the whole party went cantering off.

I cast one despairing glance behind as the jade disk and ring of pillars that represented my only hope of returning to my own world receded and were lost in the distance.

4. KOJA OF THE YATHOON HORDE

Now I entered the first period of my captivity upon Thanator. For two months I was a prisoner among the strange beings who had saved me from the attack of the yathrib. The days passed slowly and without incident, as I learned the curious ways of this jungle world. To relate a day-by-day chronicle of my imprisonment would occupy far too many pages of this manuscript; hence I shall speak only of the discoveries I made in the camp of the Yathoon Horde.

When I got a closer look at the weird creatures who had captured me, I saw they were in no respect human. If anything, they resembled in their tall attenuated forms and jerking, many-jointed stride, gigantic insects like the praying mantis. Whether or not they were true insects, according to the technical definition of the word, I must leave to whatever scientists may one day peruse this document I now inscribe. Suffice it to say, they more closely resembled insects than any other form of life I could think of.

They stood about seven feet tall and were impossibly slim and skeletal. Like many true arthropods, their lean bodies were clad in an external horny coating like chitin. This segmented exoskeleton was a uniform silver-gray and exuded a sharp but not unpleasant scent which I eventually identified as the harsh metallic odor of ants-formic acid, I believe it is called.

Like many terrene insect forms, the Thanatorian arthropod has a body composed of three major sections.

First, the head, which is a horny and all but featureless ovoid like a slightly elongated egg, sharply pointed at the smaller end. These heads have neither nose nor nostril, insofar as I have been able to observe, and the mechanism of the mouth and jaw is concealed on the underside of this casque-like ovoid and too complicated for me to accurately picture in words.

They have two eyes, one on each side of the head, and much larger than the human, but without whites. These do not seem to be the usual faceted, compound eye structures I have seen in magnified drawings of insects. They are black, glittering, and devoid of any expressiveness. In order to blink, the arthropod uses two horny translucent membranes, one descending from the upper rim of the eye case and one rising from the lower, both covering the eye completely.

The insect creatures have no ears, or at least no external ears, and I have never been able to understand just how they manage to detect sounds. But they do have two long, slender, tapering and jointed antennae or feelers which extend from just above either eye, curving backwards gracefully over the skull. For all I know, these may be sensitive to the vibrations of sound.

Instead of necks, they have a jointed tubular structure composed of two rings, wherewith their heads are fastened to the second portion of their bodies, the thorax, which is a smooth, glistening, upright ovoid larger than the head, and shoulderless. From this two long arms with multiple joints extend. Their arms are twice as long as human arms and have an extra joint, like a secondary elbow. Slim and tapering shafts of chitin, these arms look like bare bones, ending in very long, thin, splayed, segmented fingers. There are four of these fingers, the central pair being about four inches longer than the outermost and innermost fingers, which are also of equal length. They have no thumb, but as the fingers have six joints each and are capable of extreme flexibility, they are able to handle objects at least as easily as do our human hands with their opposing thumbs.

The thorax of the arthropod-the upper chest, you might call it-is joined by a narrow banded waist to the abdomen, a long tapering spindle-shaped structure which thrusts out behind the legs. These hind limbs also have an extra joint like those of the forelimbs, and end in four-toed, or -clawed, splayed feet. In the

case of the feet, three widely separated toes are thrust out in front and the fourth toe, like the spur on a bird's foot, extends to the rear. These multiple-jointed hind limbs are oddly constructed. The first segment (you might call it the thigh) thrusts forward from the hip joint, ending in a knee joint; the second segment, the lower leg, thrusts sharply backwards, ending in an ankle joint, from which a third segment thrusts forward again, ending in yet another ankle joint, to which is affixed the enormous, splayed, clawlike toes.

These hind limbs, with their multiple joints and odd articulations, strongly resemble the structure of a dog's hind leg. The arthropods run with incredible swiftness; their great hind limbs send them bounding along in springing leaps. They also use these limbs most peculiarly in war. The Yathoon warriors go armed with most unusual swords, in addition to the great black war bows. These whip swords, as they are called, are not unlike the fencing epee, but are of amazing length—a good sixty inches of finger-thin, very flexible steel, ending not in a point but in a bladed barb like an arrowhead. They use these swords very much like whips, and the wound inflicted by the lashing blow of that bladed barb is a terrible one. In battle, the arthropods leap suddenly into the air like great grasshoppers, their long ungainly arms bringing the whip-sword down in swift, lashing strokes that are very difficult to parry and can best be avoided by hopping backwards or to one side. A duel between two Yathoon warriors—and I saw many such during my internment among them—is a bewildering scene of leaping, agile figures bounding several yards into the air, the whipping needle of their swords whistling through the air shrilly.

Yet for all their height, agility, and speed, the arthropods are less strong than a human being. This is due to the nature of their musculature. In human anatomy, our inner skeletons serve as a solid structure against which our muscles are anchored, giving leverage. But the insect creatures have no internal skeletons—their external crust of horn serving to hold them rigid. The muscles of the arthropods, then, are anchored rather flimsily to the inner walls of this exoskeletal crust, which gives them nowhere near the muscular leverage or, thus, the strength of men.

Whether or not they are truly evolved from insects I cannot say. But, if I recall correctly, terrene insects have no lungs, their under-thorax containing small perforations through which oxygen enters their system. The arthropods of Thanator have genuine lungs, for the segmented plates of the thorax expand and contract rhythmically, held together by a hard but flexible gummy substance like cartilage, and their thoraxes swell and diminish to the breathing of inner lungs. It might well be they are not insects at all, but that some form of crustacean life acted as their evolutionary ancestors. I can but give the data I observe

I lack the knowledge to interpret it scientifically.*

For the duration of my captivity I remained in the possession of the warrior who had captured me—the same male who had led the hunting party and whose bow had slain the yathrib there on the slope of that hill. I soon learned that the insect creatures had a language, and that my owner was known to them as Koja.

My position among the warriors of the Yathoon (as they call themselves) was difficult to explain. I was a prisoner, but not exactly a slave; I was permitted to wander where I would in the camp but not allowed to leave its perimeter, which was constantly guarded.

Koja was a komor or chieftain among the Horde. His rank was earned by his prowess in war rather than by any nobility of birth. His position in the hierarchy of his clan was very high, and his retinue was princely.

This retinue, or household, to which I now belonged consisted of a dozen young cadet warriors and twice that number of servitors. The cadets were not his offspring, but youthful warriors of the clan who

were in his service to learn from a warrior of the greatest distinction the arts of combat and hunting. It was not unlike the system used in the terrene Middle Ages, whereby the younger sons of a noble house would enter the service of another lord, thereby receiving knightly training and schooling in the gentle arts of courtesy, chivalry, and honor. The cadets lived with Koja, served him, assisted in his hunting parties, and wore his markings.

The camp area reserved for the retinue of Koja consisted of some twenty tents of black felt, arranged in a double circle with the largest tent in the very center. Koja himself dwelt in the central tent, together with his hoard, or treasure. As to my position in the band of Koja's retinue, I think I was considered more a possession than a captive, and in this connection I should explain that, among the Yathoon, rank and position were recognized not only on fighting skill but also on the basis of wealth. The arthropods use no medium of exchange such as coinage, but the retinue of each warrior chieftain protects his hoard of treasures. These are not what we would call treasures -gems or precious metals or even artworks are valueless to the Yathoon-but what we would consider a collection of curios. Rare shells, oddly shaped or colored stones, weirdly twisted bits of wood, bright feathers, the skulls of beasts-these constitute the "treasure" guarded by a Yathoon chieftain. The tents of his retinue resemble a jackdaw's nest, or the hoard of a packrat. And it was with wry amusement that I came at length to realize my true position, as a prized possession, or amatar, of Koja.

I was an exotic curio!

I assumed at this time that all of Thanator was inhabited only by these nomadic tribes of arthropods, and that I was unique. It was not until much later that I discovered that the Yathoon Horde shared their world with at least three other distinctly different races of intelligent human beings, and that it was the peculiar hues of my yellow hair and blue eyes that rendered me valuable-a "collector's item."

My first impressions of these ungainly, stalking insect creatures was, I think naturally, one of revulsion and horror. I have never had a neurotic terror of crawling insects, but the weird, gaunt, faceless arthropods were so completely unlike anything I had ever encountered that my initial reaction was to find them repulsive and loathsome.

My reaction during these opening days of my enslavement was due in part to a fear that I was in imminent danger of being served up as the main course in some sort of disgusting cannibal feast-or at least that I was soon to be tortured to death on the altars of some alien divinity. But no such fate ensued, and in time I learned that I was in no danger of either cannibalism or torment, and would receive decent treatment from my captors.

My first reaction to the arthropods was, as I have said, one of revulsion at what I deemed their hideous and inhuman aspect. Inhuman they certainly were, but "hideous" is a matter of open question. The fact that they differed enormously from *Homo sapiens* was no reason to find their appearance automatically loathsome. Very soon I found myself admiring them. Slim, stalking figures, they were not without a certain grace -even a certain cold inhuman beauty. With their attenuated limbs and extreme height they came, with familiarity, to assume something of the dignity and impressiveness of the lean gaunt statues of Giacometti or Henry Moore's weird stone figures.

Indeed, they had also something of the sleek, economical efficiency of a well-designed machine. Almost I could picture those stalking, multijointed limbs as smoothly machined pistons. Something of the passionless beauty of the machine was theirs, and something of the grandeur of sculpture.

In short, I no longer found them frightening, having no reason to fear my fate at their hands.

I found that they treated me well, or at least did not mistreat me overtly. They seemed, if anything, to pay very little attention to me, wrapped up as they were in their own unimaginable inner lives and busied with their own affairs.

Indeed, the retinue of Kojas' slaves-captive arthropods won in battle with rival clans-fed and cared for me solicitously, if coldly. The arthropods do not know the human emotions-love, kindness, mercy, and friendship are completely alien to their mentality. This is a mixed blessing, at best. But, at least, if they know no kindness they are equally ignorant of cruelty. They neither torture nor mistreat their captives. Ignorant of the nobler sentiments, they are devoid of the more bestial.

Koja interrogated me at length upon our return to the vast war camp of the Horde. He seemed baffled at my inability to understand his harsh metallic language. And he seemed equally puzzled as the sounds of English words came from my lips. I tried Spanish and Portuguese, with which I was intimately familiar from my childhood, and a few phrases of French, German, and Vietnamese. He was equally unfamiliar with all of these. Eventually he stalked out, leaving me in the care of one of his servitors, an arthropod named Sujat. Sujat was personally in charge of caring for my needs, which he did with cold efficiency.

A row of uncouth symbols was painted across my chest-symbols whose meanings I was not to discover until somewhat later. As for the rest of my person, I went as naked as when I had first appeared on this world. The Yathoon, of course, with their chitinous exoskeleton which protects their soft inner parts from harm and from extremes of temperature, have no need of clothing. Lacking external sexual organs, they are devoid of the very concept of bodily modesty, as they are of ornament or fashion.

Their only garment, if it can be dignified with such a term, is a leather strap worn across the thorax like a baldric, and to which is affixed the long supple length of the whip-sword, held thus scabbarded across what would be their shoulders if they had shoulders, which they do not. The five-foot length of this blade would make it impractical to be worn at the hip. This baldric, and a row of painted symbols across the front of the upper thorax, constitutes their entire raiment. These symbols are not unlike those painted upon my own chest, and I was shortly to learn their meaning.

Although Sujat was in charge of me, it was Kojas himself who served as my instructor in the Thanatorian tongue. This was, I suppose, a signal honor, but I think it was prompted purely by Kojas' curiosity about his new toy. At any rate, Kojas taught me his language with enormous patience and an unswerving sense of purpose that I would have thought highly admirable in a human being. But I could not, at least at this early date, think of my "owner" in terms of human attributes. His gaunt, alien person still, to some degree at least, seemed repellent to me.

This language was very interesting and, in many aspects, unique. I later discovered that the four races who inhabit Thanator have-incredible as it may seem, in mind of their enormous differences-a common tongue which is identical in all respects save, perhaps, in vocabulary. For the arthropods have not, or at least do not use, any words for such purely human conceptions as "love," "friendship," "mother," "father," "wife," or "son."

Such concepts do have a place, I later learned, in the universal language of this planet, but as the arthropods have no use or need for such terms, they are ignorant of them.

No other language than this single universal tongue has ever been known on the jungle moon; indeed, it was with the very greatest difficulty that, in the early days of my captivity, I made my captors grasp the notion that I was totally ignorant of their tongue and required patient instruction therein. The very concept of an intelligent being unfamiliar with the common tongue-to say nothing of the idea of a being who spoke "another" language-seemed incomprehensible to them. I am convinced that, at the beginning at least,

Koja believed me mentally deficient; an idiot or at least a low-grade moron. But with some effort I managed to get across the idea that I wished to learn their language, and he taught me with great efficiency.

Since I have spent the greater part of my life knocking about the odd corners of the globe, I have developed an ear for languages and have a nodding acquaintance with a dozen earthly tongues. Hence I really did not find it difficult to master the basics of Thanatorian. At the beginning it was easy. I would point to objects, to parts of the body or of the landscape, to tools, weapons, articles of furniture, and receive from the expressionless Koja the relevant Thanatorian term. To assist in memorizing these words I wrote them down in English letters, a process that seemed greatly to mystify my tutor. Among the jackdaw's nest of curiosities that formed the wealth of Koja, I found an enameled box containing writing implements, rather like a Japanese writing case. This was, by the way, my first inkling that the Yathoon warriors shared their world with a higher civilization. For the arthropods were completely ignorant of writing, and when I suggested with appropriate gestures to Sujat that I would like to use these instruments he stalked from the tent to fetch his master, who came to stand, impassively watching as I displayed the uses to which I wished to put the writing case.

It was obvious to me that Koja had no understanding of why I wished to make little squiggly marks with the cut end of a thaptor feather* dipped in black substance and scrawled upon sheets of brownish paper that looked like coarse papyrus. But as I handled the implements with delicate care, he resolved to permit me to play with them as it seemed I had no intention of harming his "treasures."

Thus, able to compile a vocabulary of Thanatorian terms for my own study, I made quite rapid progress in my mastery of the language. We shortly progressed beyond simple nouns to verbs, and here we must have made a ludicrous spectacle, acting out various actions. I recall in particular one hilarious scene: Koja was giving me a verb which he illustrated by hopping up and down. It took me some little while to figure out whether he was giving me the word for "hop" or "walk" or "up" or what. And all the time the poor fellow, with his solemn and totally expressionless face, stood there on the beaten earth outside my tent, soberly jumping up and down like some ungainly grasshopper!

As I say, we encountered no real difficulty in our language lessons until we passed beyond simple nouns and verbs, colors and numbers, into the more baffling regions of the participles. I suppose this is a common difficulty in learning any language in this manner-how in the world do you illustrate such elusive terms as "and," "the," or "of"?-but then I had never before had to master a language without a text or at least a teacher familiar with my own tongue.

In the course of these lessons, which we pursued almost every single day from morning to evening, I picked up an enormous amount of miscellaneous information. I discovered that the arthropods were a race of warlike nomads, divided into several rival clans who were perpetually at war, each clan against all others. These clans, five of them in all, were-this internecine rivalry notwithstanding-all part of the same Horde, the Yathoon, and all under one common leader, who was known as the Arkon, which I suppose could be defined as "king." The Arkon, whose name was Uthar, lived far away at a certain secret place in the mountains. The various clans of the Horde went forth every few months from this hidden place to hunt for meat (and "treasure"), returning at a certain specific date. When they entered their capital-Koja called it "the Secret Valley of Sargol,"—they were instantly at peace with one another, regardless of the fact they were at each other's throats until they reached the very entrance stone of the Secret Valley!

I never found out the name of the clan that had taken me captive. I do not, in fact, believe the five clans had names to differentiate them—a fact which I found rather remarkable. Koja explained it to me in his usual solemn way.

“We know the clan to which we belong,” he said. “And we know that the males of all other clans are our foes. And we know a strange male when we encounter him. What need have we, then, for labels?”

I could find nothing wrong with this statement; for all I knew it was by their different smell that the members of one clan identify a stranger. But I seized this opportunity to ask a question that had been puzzling me for some time.

“What, then, are the colored markings on the upper thorax of all Yathoon warriors?”

I should explain that on the front of the thorax a peculiar series of symbols were painted in bright colors: red, black, green, and gold. These were nothing like alphabetical symbols-for, as I learned from Koja’s reaction to my use of the writing case, the arthropods have no conception of writing-but were instead geometrical symbols, lines, curves, and irregular splotches of raw color.

My tutor explained to me that these were-ah, but here I come to an untranslatable concept peculiar to the insect creatures. The glyphs, or whatever they were, served as markings to identify tribal rank, prestige, and the number of enemy kills-a strange combination of army rank insignia with the stickers on the fuselage of a fighter plane, I suppose, which indicate the number of enemy craft one ace has downed. I was glad to have my curiosity on this subject satisfied: hitherto I had assumed them to be in the nature of personal names or heraldic blazons, indicating family alliances. But I had discovered that the Yathoon warriors hold their females in common and have no conception of an individual mate. Indeed, paternity itself is unknown to them; all they know is that at regular intervals their females lay a grublike larva which eventually matures into male or female specimens of their race. Since no Yathoon knows who his father or mother were, and since all of the Yathoon larvae or young are raised in common, the arthropods are completely without anything like a family life. I have often wondered whether this total lack of family, or of mating, or of father- and motherhood, was the reason they lacked the more tender emotions.

Perhaps. Or perhaps not. Since they were not human-or even mammalian-I suppose it would be foolish to expect the warmer emotions from these weird creatures, and vain to feel them somehow lacking in that they know them not. And yet surely they were a stark cold race, devoid of religion, science, art, philosophy, and sentiment. They lived only for war and the hunt. They were an amazing people.

The servitors in a chieftain’s retinue bore no such marking painted upon their thoraxes. I, however, did. Koja, when queried, explained at last my amusing position as an exotic “oddity” in his hoard or curio collection; all of his possessions were marked thus, to render impractical and difficult the theft of his treasures by a rival chieftain.

As I became more familiar with the Thanatorian language, I spent many hours conversing with my “owner.” Koja, I learned, was one of the mightiest komors in all his clan, a warrior of great renown, a huntsman of enviable skill. The meat taken by the Yathoon on this long foray was salted or somehow pickled in kegs of spiced wood, which would be borne along in the midst of the war party in wains drawn by thaptor teams when at last they came to make their long trek home to the Secret Valley of their race.

This great homeward migration would commence in about three weeks, I learned. I was curious to see under what conditions the Yathoon females lived and how they reared their young, so it was with a certain eagerness that I awaited the signal to decamp.

Before the migration could begin, however, there occurred an unforeseen incident that resulted in my making my first friend among the strange and inhuman inhabitants of this distant world.

Koja had been absent from my language lesson for the greater part of this particular day, and I took the opportunity to roam the enormous camp of the Horde, exploring its peculiar ways.

Returning to the cluster of tents belonging to my owner, I saw the servitors of Koja's retinue in an unwonted agitation. The only one of the servitors whom I knew well enough to recognize-at this stage, frankly, one arthropod looked very much like another to me-I caught his attention. It was Sujat. I asked the reason for the flurry and confusion, and he informed me in his cold harsh voice that our mutual master, Koja, had been on a hunting party that morning and had been attacked by a rival hunting party from another clan nearby. The warriors of our clan had been defeated and driven away.

"And what of Koja?" I asked. His cold unwinking gaze bore no expression as he made reply.

"He is sorely wounded and has been left to die," he informed me.

5. I GAIN MY FREEDOM

It is not difficult for me to analyze my feelings on hearing the news of this disaster. To be candid, a certain amount of personal interest occupied my mind. For were Koja to die, his hoard would fall to the next most powerful chieftain of the Yathoon, an arthropod known as Gamchan. While Koja treated me, if not kindly, at least not unkindly, Gamchan had often loudly remarked in my presence and that of Koja that I was no curiosity but an ugly hybrid-he mentioned two nations or races of which I had not heard -"a by-blow of a Zanadar pirate and a Ku Thad" was how he expressed it.

I had gathered that Gamchan was jealous of Koja and sought by such unsubtle means to "put down" his prime curiosity-myself. Koja took no notice of the bad temper of the envious Gamchan, who was a minor chieftain of inferior rank and prowess, although next to Koja in the hierarchical structure of Horde command. But I had few illusions about the sort of treatment I might expect if ever I were unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of Gamchan.

But beyond the problem of my personal safety there was the simple matter of my indebtedness to Koja, who had not only saved me from the yathrib but had given me food and shelter in his retinue. So I questioned Sujat as to the nature and extent of Koja's injuries.

To my queries Sujat merely shrugged-or, rather, gave a negligent twitch of his brow antenna-a gesture which was the Yathoon equivalent of a shrug. I gathered that the Yathoon warriors take no care of their injured. Here again I saw the drawbacks of their lack of sentiment, and also the advantage inherent in their lack of innate cruelty. For among terrene barbarians, such as the Mongol horde, for example, the injured are often slain. At least his comrades had not bothered to dispatch the injured Koja: they had merely left him behind to die.

Among the possessions of Koja were a number of thaptors. These are the weird bird-horses the Thanatorians use for steeds. They are the size of terrene stallions, or perhaps a bit larger, and, like their equine counterparts on Earth, they have four legs, an arched neck, are ridden from a saddle and guided by reins and a bit. But there the resemblance to a horse ends. For the thaptor is a quadruped species of wingless bird, with clawed feet spurred like those of a rooster. Around the base of their skulls a stiff ruff

of feathers extends, almost like a horse's mane. Their heads are very unhorselike, though, with sharp yellow parrot-beaks and glaring eyes wherein a bright orange pupil, ringed with a black iris, stares forth with fierce malignancy. These bird-horses are broken to the bridle with great difficulty and never become completely tractable, although they come at length to recognize their owners and are resigned to carrying them. But woe to the stranger who attempts to ride one!

Snatching up a clean cloth and a container of water, I went out into the compound where Koja's thaptors were constrained in pens. My heart was in my mouth and I confess to an extreme nervousness. I had fed and watered these thaptors many times, and I knew they would recognize me. Whether or not they would permit me astride their backs was another question, and one of considerable dubiety.

Sujat followed me curiously.

"What do you intend to do?" he inquired.

"I am going to help Koja," I said.

"But Koja is wounded," he said. There was a stolid finality behind his words which made them equate to "Koja is dead."

I climbed over the bars of the paddock and made soothing clucking sounds to one of the thaptors who had always seemed less unfriendly than the others.

"Wounds heal," I suggested. Sujat shrugged.

"What does it matter?" he asked indifferently.

"To you, nothing; to me, quite a bit," I said. "It is the difference between your kind and mine, Sujat."

I saddled the thaptor, who sidled restlessly but soon subsided at my touch. Then, daring much, I carefully climbed astride the thaptor, speaking quietly to him all the while. He peered about with his wide, round, mad little parrot's eye but did not seem particularly enraged to see me in the saddle. I began to relax.

"Where is Koja?" I asked. Sujat described the place; I thought I could find it without difficulty.

At my request, Sujat opened the paddock gate and I guided the thaptor out and down the narrow lane of beaten earth that ran between two rows of tents towards the south gate of the vast encampment. This being the noon hour, few warriors were abroad, most feeding in the quiet of their quarters. But many servitors were about, and these eyed me with stolid indifference, although if they had been human they must have been amazed to see a human riding one of their savage thaptors.

I had expected to have to argue with the guards at the perimeter of the encampment, but such was not the case. One guard hailed me.

"Where are you going, Jandar? You know you are not permitted beyond the encampment."

I should explain that to the vocal apparatus of the Thanatorians my name, Jon Dark, is slightly difficult to pronounce. On their tongues it sounds more like Zhan-dar, or Jandar. After several futile attempts to correct this pronunciation, I have become resigned to it. And I have been Jandar to the inhabitants of Thanator ever since.

“I am going to help the chieftain, Koja,” I replied.

“But he is wounded!”

“That’s why he needs my help,” I returned.

He seemed somewhat nonplussed. He stood there, tall ungainly creature, the daylight glistening on his carapace of silvery gray chitin, fiddling with the hilt of his long whip-sword.

“But Koja is likely dead by now,” he objected. “And it is his order that you may not venture beyond the perimeter of the camp.”

“If Koja is dead then his orders are meaningless, is that not so?” I asked. Then, without waiting for a reply, but also without precipitous haste, I rode past him and left the puzzled guard standing there striving to figure out what to do.

I rode for the better part of an hour until I found where Koja had fallen. Several dead arthropods lay sprawled about, and from the unfamiliar thorax markings they wore I assumed them to have been warriors of the rival clan.

Koja had apparently dragged himself some distance and now lay partially propped up against the thorny bole of a sorad tree. The sorad is rare among the trees of the Thanatorian jungles in that, instead of having black wood and crimson foliage, it has crimson wood and black foliage. I knew that this rareness lent it a unique interest in the minds of the Yathoon, for they prize that which is unusual and hold almost in superstitious veneration that which is unique. Doubtless the rarity of the sorad tree lent it an aspect of reverence in the eyes of Koja, and hence he must have painfully dragged himself to its foot. Now he lay sluggish and dull-eyed, waiting for death, but sustained and heartened in some fashion by his proximity to the unusual tree.

He unlidded his eyes and turned their black glittering gaze on me as I approached, dismounted, and strode over to where he lay.

“Jandar? Why are you here?” he said faintly as I knelt down by him to examine his wounds.

“To give you assistance,” I replied. He had sustained a terrible blow across the thorax. The bladed barb of an enemy’s whip sword had laid open the horny covering of his thorax and he was losing his bodily fluids. A bubbling froth of colorless, oily liquid seeped from the edges of this ghastly wound and the sharp, medicinal stench of formic acid hung thickly about him.

Koja was somewhat more quick-witted than the majority of his race. But to his way of thinking it was incredible that one creature should render aid to another in this world where all beings were engaged in a relentless war against all other beings.

“Why should you wish to assist me?” he asked as I began tending to his injuries.

As I cleaned them as best I could with clean cloths soaked in fresh water, I replied absently: “Because you saved me from the fangs of the yathrib. Because you gave me food and shelter and the protection of your retinue in a world where all beings are strangers to me. And because you have not mistreated me.”

“These are facts; they are not reasons,” he protested.

“Very well, then. If you must have a reason, because I—“ And here I was forced to hesitate. The Yathoon vocabulary contains no words for such concepts as “friendship” or “pity.” The closest I could come was the word uhorz, which means something like “indebtedness.”

“Because I feel uhorz towards you,” I said finally.

“Uhorz?”

“Yes. And now please do not speak. I must draw the edges of your wound together tightly, and bind them thus, if they are to heal.”

Somehow or other I got Koja back to the encampment, although we were forced to go very slowly so that the jogging pace of the thaptor would not open his wounds and cause him to lose yet more of his bodily fluids. I went afoot, leading the bird-horse at the end of the reins, while Koja rode upright in the saddle, swaying with weakness. I went as slowly and as carefully as possible so as to spare Koja as much pain as I could; but I believe he fainted at least twice during the journey. I had taken the precaution of strapping him securely in the saddle by means of strips torn from the wet cloths wherewith I had cleansed his wounds.

I found no difficulty in reentering the encampment. The guards stood about staring as I led the thaptor past them, but they made no attempt to interfere with my actions. If Koja lived, he was a chieftain of great power, authority, and prowess; if he died, it was a matter of complete indifference to them. So long as I had returned to camp and had not seized this opportunity to escape, they were vindicated in having permitted me to leave it in the first place.

Sujat and I put Koja to bed. The Yathoon sleep in a sort of nest of cloths: devilishly uncomfortable, to humans at least, but they seem to find the nests adequate. Koja had fallen into a deep trancelike sleep, and I did not attempt to awaken him, even so that he might partake of nourishment.

He slept an unbroken slumber for the next several days. As Sujat seemed indifferent to the condition of his master’s health, I tended to the warrior myself. This was a simple matter. As the arthropods have no knowledge of the pharmaceutical arts, there were no salves or medicines or healing unguents with which I could treat his injuries. The most I could do was to change the bandages on his wounds once a day and make certain that fresh water and food were at hand, should he awaken and desire them.

Several times during these days the warrior Gamchan came to the area reserved for Koja’s retinue and demanded entrance. Each time I told him my master was asleep and did not wish to be disturbed. He seemed baffled at my taking such unwonted authority upon myself and at a loss as to how to face me down. Repeatedly he asked me if Koja was dead: each time I replied, quite truthfully, that Koja lived. He went away, grumbling and dissatisfied, and each time it was more difficult to persuade him to desist from his attempts to enter.

I was not in the least afraid of Gamchan, for I was by now well aware of the enormous difference in strength between the insect creatures and a—human being. But I had no desire to blatantly offend against the clan laws of the Yathoon Horde, or to risk the dangers of open enmity between a lowly possession like myself and a chieftain such as Gamchan.

Eventually, the wound seemed to be healing. Cartilage formed, uniting the lips of the wound, gradually hardening into chitin. Koja awoke and requested food. He was very weak, and famished, but he seemed to be mending. He inquired as to who had been tending him and I explained that I had been doing it

myself. He made no reply to this, but after I found him eyeing me in a thoughtful fashion.

It was towards the end of the second month of my sojourn among the warriors of the Yathoon Horde that the orders came down that all should be made ready for the expected departure for the Secret Valley. Koja, who was now up and around and seemed almost entirely to have recovered from his near brush with death, came to me in my tent one night, shortly before the departure of the clan. In one hand he bore a bundle of garments and a whip-sword.

“Put these on, Jandar,” he said solemnly.

I examined them curiously: they were the first body coverings of any kind that I had seen among the Yathoon, except for the ever-present baldric and shoulder scabbard. They consisted of a high-necked, open-throated leather tunic with short sleeves, a tunic obviously devised for an anatomy such as my own. The bottom of the tunic extended down to mid-thigh, and there was a loincloth for an undergarment, and soft supple buskins that laced up the ankles.

“What are these, Koja?”

“They are the raiment worn by creatures such as yourself,” he replied calmly. “I have always wondered why such beings covered their bodies with these layers, but since you have been among my hoard possessions, I have observed that your body is softer than my own, and I assume that such coverings are designed to protect such softness against the sharp thorn-edged leaves of the jungle.”

“That is thoughtful of you,” I said. “Is the clan riding through the jungle, then?”

“The clan takes the hill road to the mountains,” he said. “But the safest place for you will be the jungles.”

My pulses began to race, as I perceived his meaning.

“You are permitting me to escape?” I asked.

“I am,” he said. “Take this sword for your defense. And here is a packet of food. As soon as it is completely dark you can leave the tent and find your way to the perimeter with the least chance of discovery. Should any stop you, tell them that you are obeying a command of the chieftain Koja.”

He turned away and opened the tent flap and would have gone without another word had I not halted him.

“Why are you doing this, Koja?” I asked.

He turned and regarded me for a long moment of silence. His black jeweled gaze held utterly no expression; the hard gleaming casque of his ovoid face was not capable of registering emotion, and his harsh metallic voice was able to suggest only a limited range of inflection. But there was a wealth of meaning in his words.

“I do this so that you will know that even a Yathoon warrior can feel-uhorz,” he said simply.

And then he was gone.

And so I left the Yathoon encampment, where I had spent my first two months upon Thanator in captivity.

I found no difficulty in leaving the great camp, for the darkness of the night made visibility poor. Only one moon was aloft, lime-green Orovad, and in the bustle of preparation and the confusion of breaking camp, no one had eyes for the small human figure that slipped silently from shadow to shadow until it was well beyond the camp.

I faced the mysterious terrors of the Thanatorian jungles alone, but I was not afraid. I was clothed and armed, and a knapsack of food was upon my back. I did not know where I was going, but it was sufficient that I was free at last to go wherever I wished. I would have struck out for the Gate Between The Worlds had I known in which direction it lay, but I did not know, and so sudden and unexpected was the decision of Koja to give me my freedom that it had not occurred to me to ask its whereabouts.

I reached the edge of the jungle before the rising of the second moon, rose-red Imavad, and entered therein. For two nights and two days I traveled through the trackless jungles of Thanator, without the slightest idea of where I was going. Or even of my direction. I should explain that here upon Thanator -I did not at this time know which of the twelve moons of Jupiter Thanator was-the sun is so distant that it is but the brightest of the stars. The surface of the jungle moon receives very little direct sunlight. I have never been able to decide the source of the light that bathes Thanator, but I suspect that it is the sunlight reflected from the enormous disk of giant Jupiter, or that reflected from the three huge moons that are almost always in the skies.

But I have also observed a curious phenomenon. The orbits of the major Jovian moons are endlessly complex, and there are times when only one moon is aloft in the skies of Thanator during the day. This, oddly enough, in no way diminishes the amount of daylight. The quantity of the daylight remains constant no matter how many moons are aloft, and whether or not the giant orb of Jupiter is visible. I have often wondered if what seems to be daylight is not some radiant effect of the upper atmosphere; I have mentioned earlier in this account of my adventures the odd appearance of the skies of Thanator-that appearance of a crawling film of golden mists. Perhaps the illumination of the moon's surface is somehow due to the effects of radiation striking that golden mist, which must be a layer of unknown gas high above the breathable air of Thanator. An effect perhaps akin to the light that flares from inert neon gas when an electrical current passes through it. You will of course be familiar with neon signs, that boon to the advertising profession: the inert vapor lies in glass tubes, which, when an electrical current is passed through them, blaze with light. Perhaps the upper layers of the atmosphere of Thanator are composed of neon, or of some comparable gas which, during the hours of daylight, is under the bombardment of electrical forces.

But this was only one of the baffling questions that had puzzled me during the many weeks of my captivity.

I had given considerable thought to the problem of just where I was. Astronomy has always interested me, and as I have a good head for figures and an almost photographic memory, I was able to recall quite a bit of information about the solar system, enough, it seemed, to base a firm opinion.

This, obviously, was one of the twelve moons of Jupiter. It could hardly be either of the two planets nearest to Jupiter, which are Mars and Saturn. Mars is something like three hundred million miles closer to the sun than Jupiter, and surely even that banded and Brobdingnagian giant would not bulk so hugely in its skies. Besides, Mars has only two moons and this world at least four.

Nor could it very easily be Saturn, and for much the same reasons. For Saturn was even farther away from Jupiter than was Mars-somewhere in the neighborhood of four hundred million miles distant.

The only bodies close enough to Jupiter for the giant world to bulk so enormously in their skies would be the Jovian satellites themselves. I recalled that some of these are quite large-Io, the second moon counting outwards from Jupiter, is about two thousand miles in diameter, only slightly smaller than Earth's own moon. Europa, the next of the satellites, is slightly smaller than that, while the fourth moon, Ganymede, with its diameter of more than three thousand miles, is perhaps the largest of all the moons in the solar system. The fifth moon, Callisto, has a diameter of about two thousand seven hundred miles. The moons beyond the orbit of Callisto, Hestia, Hera, Demeter, are all extremely small, with a diameter of eighty to ten miles each. These three I could safely eliminate from consideration. And the four outermost of the Jovian moons-Adrastea, Pan, Poseidon, and Hades-could also safely be eliminated because of their very small size, as well as their retrograde orbits. My conclusion, then, was easy and obvious. Three large moons and one very small one were visible in the night sky between this world of Thanator and its titanic primary; they must be the four innermost of the Jovian satellites, the first moon, Amalthea, and the three larger ones, Io, Europa, and Ganymede. Hence I decided, to my own satisfaction, at least, that Thanator was Callisto!

But if this is true, how can the gravity of Callisto be so very similar to that of Earth? Earth's diameter at the equator is 7,927 miles, almost three times larger than Callisto. It would seem natural for Callisto to have a gravity one third that of Earth, but such is not the case.

And how can a world so small hold an atmosphere? Earth's moon is only a little smaller than Callisto, and its gravity is insufficient to hold anything like this thick rich air that I had been breathing now for two months. Would I ever find the answer to these mysteries?

During the entire period of my stay on Thanator, I have never ceased to puzzle over the curious and baffling anomalies between what I knew the surface of a Jovian satellite should be like, and the living reality through which I moved.

Everything that the terrene astronomers had ever discovered about the conditions on other worlds made it clear that Callisto should be a dead, frozen, airless world of jagged peaks and ammonia snow. Yet I walked through a jungle landscape of weird, terrific grandeur, limned in vivid and unlikely hues, and teeming with exotic life.

To this day I have not discovered the answer to this riddle.

On the third day of my freedom, I was suddenly arrested by the sounds of a battle some distance ahead of me.

I had been remarkably fortunate in that my journey through the black and crimson jungles had thus far brought me into no dangerous encounter with any of the ferocious predators wherewith this planet swarmed. In part this was due, I suppose, to blind chance or luck; but to some degree it was the result of a certain oily cream prepared by the arthropods. This substance, the distillation of an herbal sap, had the peculiar property of protecting the traveler who smeared himself therewith from the attack of a yathrib. For, although odorless to my nostrils at least, the substance is extremely offensive to the yathrib.

The Yathoon hunters use it to drive the yathrib from their proximity while engaged in rounding up a beast called the vastodon, which they hunt for its succulent meat. The yathrib is a predator who does not scruple to attack even a Yathoon hunter, and when one of the tribal hunts are in session the fearsome dragon-cat of the Thanatorian jungle has the annoying habit of lying low while the hunters round up their meat-beasts, and then charging in to carry off a prize for itself. The offensive cream, therefore, is a valuable adjunct to these meat-gathering expeditions, and I had taken the precaution to carry off a jar and kept my bare arms and legs liberally smeared with the oily stuff.

I burst through a wall of foliage into a small glade or clearing, and an astounding tableau met my eyes.

At one end of the clearing a snarling, hulking brute crouched, about to charge.

Facing him, her back against a tree trunk, her hands empty of any weapon, a young and beautiful woman faced the predator . . . and at last I knew for certain that the jungle moon of Thanator was inhabited by humans like me!

6. DARLOONA, WARRIOR PRINCESS OF THE KU THAD

I had long suspected that the insect creatures of the Yathoon Horde were not the only intelligent inhabitants of Thanator. The fact that Koja and his kind found me remarkable for my coloring rather than my physical being indicated that they were not unfamiliar with races akin to mine. And that slighting remark the jealous Gamchan had let fall, when he suggested I was some sort of a hybrid born of a mating between “the Zanadar pirates” and “the Ku Thad,” reinforced my suspicion. And then the fact of that writing case I had found among Koja’s possessions: a race ignorant of letters does not bother to invent writing cases.

Now, as I stared across the clearing at the first human being I had seen on Thanator, I found my pulse quickening, as much from the beauty of the young woman as from the surprise of the encounter.

She was perhaps twenty, tall and slender and superbly feminine. She wore a high-necked, open-throated leather tunic identical with the one Koja had given me, a tunic which extended down over her rounded hips, leaving her long and graceful legs bare save for soft buskins laced high on the instep. A wide girdle heavy with ornaments of precious metals cinched in her small waist, and from this depended a small pouch, an empty dagger scabbard, and a large medallion of some bright metal I could not at once identify.

Her skin was softly golden, clear and pale. Her small, heart-shaped face was radiantly beautiful, with large expressive eyes, slightly slanted and colored a bright flashing emerald. Her hair was a magnificent torrent of fiery red-gold which flowed over her small shoulders and down to her waist. Her mouth was soft, full-lipped, ripely crimson. Even now, in the extremity of her peril, she retained a cool poise and what I sensed to be her natural dignity.

There was an empty quiver between her shoulders, clipped to a baldric that passed over one shoulder, down between her ripe, panting young breasts, to the side of her girdle. I saw no bow, so I assumed that this quiver had held javelins, now expended, as had been her dagger.

The beast she faced was hulking and monstrous, less fearsome in appearance than the yathrib, but heavier and more massive. It looked for all the world like a miniature elephant, the same barrel of a body, the same squat, thick, columnar legs ending in flat pads, the same leathery hide, slate gray in coloring. But its head bore a closer resemblance to a wild boar: little piglike eyes glaring madly, coarse black bristles clothing an unlovely snout, vicious tusks showing the gleam of yellow ivory, bared to view as the thing voiced its thick, throaty, snarling cry. But the piglike snout of the creature was a yard long and furthered

the resemblance to an elephant.

I had recognized the beast as a vastodon; it stood six feet high at the shoulder and must have weighed two or three tons. My respect for the courage and prowess of the Yathoon warriors who hunted this hulking menace of the jungle for its meat rose considerably.

The girl, who had not yet seen me, had cast her javelins at the vastodon, seemingly missing the brute. One slender spear protruded from the crimson turf a few yards from where I stood. A vagrant beam of daylight caught the gemmy twinkle of a dagger hilt buried in the beast's burly chest. She had wounded the brute at least, but I could see that this was one monster that would take a lot of killing.

And I was armed only with a whip-sword.

The frozen tableau broke suddenly as the beast charged. If it struck the girl, she would be crushed against the knobby black bole of the tree.

Almost without thought, I sprang from the foliage with a loud shout, waving my arms to attract the vastodon's attention. The girl cast me one astonished glance, and in the next moment I was too busy to look or to think about her for the vastodon swerved in its charge and headed straight at me, heavy pads drumming against crimson turf.

I had never before used the Yathoon whip-sword, a weapon reserved for the warrior caste and forbidden equally to servitors and possessions. But I had observed several duels between rival arthropods during my months in the camp and understood the uses of the weapon. As the roaring vastodon came rushing at me I sprang high in the air and to one side, sweeping the barbed blade downwards, between my legs, the sword hilt gripped in both hands.

Unfortunately, due to the unusual length of the blade, which is fully five feet long, and the weight of the weapon, considerably heavier than any sword with which I am familiar, I found the Yathoon whipsword an unwieldy instrument. I had intended to bring the barbed blade lashing down across the face of the vastodon, splitting its skull if possible, or at least blinding it by destroying its eyes. But the barb only caught it a glancing blow on the shoulder, which laid open the tough hide in a foot-long furrow, exposing raw lavender flesh. Instead of incapacitating the vastodon, my blow only goaded it to further heights of rage.

It spun about, squealing madly, little pig-eyes red and flaming with the lust to kill, and charged again like a thunderbolt.

I had landed off balance from my leap, and now I sprawled on the turf, the whip-sword flying from my hand. As the enraged vastodon came at me I grasped the javelin the girl had flung-snatched it from the turf-and drove it into the boar-pachyderm as it came crashing into me. The impact of its charge knocked me flying. My head struck some hard object and my senses swam. Then darkness covered the world.

I was looking up into a beautiful face. Curious emerald eyes looked down at me, and ripe moist lips were parted as if to speak.

"Do you live?" the girl asked, and I was suddenly grateful that Koja had instructed me in the Thanatorian language.

"I live-" I began, trying to sit up. Bright pain lanced through me, and I broke off gasping, adding after a moment "-but as to whether I am still in one piece or not, we shall have to see!"

Something-perhaps the tusk of the vastodon-had slashed my forearm, and I had a long cut which extended from just above the wrist to an inch below the elbow. Blood welled freely from the wound, which was a surface cut. No bone was broken, and I seemed to have come through the ordeal in fairly decent shape.

As for the vastodon, it lay across the clearing dead in a puddle of purplish gore. I can take little credit for the kill; it was the impact of the brute's own wild charge that drove the javelin deep into its breast, straight through the heart. By sheerest accident, just as the beast struck and impaled itself on the blade, the javelin butt was braced against solid ground.

The girl helped me to my feet. I ached from a few bruises; my head throbbed painfully; my slashed forearm hurt abominably, and I felt a bit shaken and nauseous. But otherwise I was all right.

The girl gazed at me curiously.

"You are not Ku Thad, surely! Nor of Zanadar, either-what manner of man are you?"

"I am-" I began; and again I halted. What use to confuse the situation by relating my incredible story of birth on another world? Koja had never once questioned the manner of my appearance; like all his kind, the Yathoon was stolid and indifferent, and curiosity is a simian trait, and therefore, a human one; the Yathoon are neither human nor simian and rarely seem curious about anything.

"I am from a far country," I said lamely. "My name is Jonathan Dark."

She wrinkled her nose at the uncouth polysyllabic. "Jhonna-than'dar-?"

"Jandar," I said, resigned to the nickname first bestowed upon me by my friend Koja.

"I am Darloona of the Ku Thad, Princess of Shondakor," she said proudly. As I had no idea how a Thanatorian would acknowledge meeting with the native aristocracy, I essayed a sketchy little bow, which seemed to meet with her approval.

Reassured by now that I was all right, the Princess regarded me with slightly aloof coldness. I recalled that among the Yathoon the hand of every warrior is raised against every other, and each clan hold the neighboring clan in deadly enmity. I wondered if this was true among the human inhabitants of Thanator.
* If so, I might find this imperious lovely an enemy.

"Never have I seen a vastodon slain in so clumsy a manner," she said.

"What matter, so long as the vastodon be slain?" was my reply. She turned from me without further word and began gathering her javelins and her dagger, which was still in the shoulder of the vastodon. I washed my wound with water from the canister in my knapsack and tried to bind the wound with a bit of clean rag, which I found difficult to do with only one hand.

It occurred to me that the Princess might well have volunteered to cleanse and bind my wound. I had, after all, just saved her life and sustained the injury in doing so.

Striding over to her, I thrust out my arm and asked, rather abruptly: "Do you mind helping with this?"

Her emerald eyes held a shadow of disdain. I did not realize it, but already I had twice offended against

the Thanatorian code of honor. Among Darloona's people it is considered polite for a warrior to deprecate his own prowess at the kill. When she had made her candid appraisal of my clumsy method of slaying the vastodon, I should have agreed with her gravely. And a warrior is thought somewhat less than manly if he binds or even tends his wounds. In this much, at least, the Ku Thad were not unlike Koja and his kind.

However, the Princess did not refuse but bound my wound in silence. I was aware of a slight breach between us but I did not quite know how to mend it. Darloona could not know the extent of my unfamiliarity with the customs common to all four human races upon Thanator: hence she could not be blamed for thinking me a bit of a boor.

As she bent near, tying the cloth about my wound, her eyes suddenly dilated with incredulous disbelief and she stood apart from me abruptly. I did not understand what had so forcibly repelled her, and I glanced down, to see that the boarlike tusk of the vastodon had torn open the front of my leather tunic, laying bare my chest and the green, black, and crimson "possession" symbols which still remained upon me, to mark me to every eye as a belonging of the Yathoon.

I was not to understand until much later. Her shock at discovering me to be a slave, or a former slave, of a Yathoon, was not so much an aristocrat's disgust at encountering a servile being as her instant suspicion that I was what you might call a Judas goat. The Yathoon sometimes take servitors from the human races, although as it happened there had been no human servitors in the camp of Koja's clan during the period of my stay. And sometimes these slaves, their markings disguised beneath the tunic of a free warrior, such as I wore, are used to lure unsuspecting humans into entrapment by the arthropods. Had I understood her instant revulsion, had I known of this vile custom and understood the suspicion which she now entertained, I could of course have explained and set her mind at rest. But, not knowing, I did nothing but stare at her.

And in the very next moment it was too late for any explanation.

The foliage parted and a dozen Yathoon warriors stepped into the clearing to confront Darloona and myself. The leader of the party was Koja's rival and enemy, Gamchan. If ever I read the slightest shade of expression in the featureless casque of a Yathoon face, it was then. For Gamchan smirked in an oily, ominous, very self-satisfied way. How his immobile masklike face managed to express this emotion I cannot say. For all I know it was sheer telepathy. But smirk he did, and nastily at that.

He had followed on my track the instant it was learned that I was no longer in the encampment. Koja had a perfect right to set me free if he desired, although his motives for doing so would have been incomprehensible to his brethren. But Gamchan, equally, had a perfect right to pursue and, if possible, recapture me, making me his possession, if he wished. And, his former slighting remarks notwithstanding, he had gone after me with a pack of junior warriors with just that purpose in mind. It would have made a splendid coup against the prestige of Koja if he were able to seize me for his own. And now he had done so, and had taken a second prize as well! It was no wonder that Gamchan was pleased with himself.

As far as I was concerned, I would gladly have been his possession voluntarily, if only I could somehow have prevented him from making the remark that he now made.

Of all the conceivable words that could have been uttered, no more damning phrase could have been imagined.

"Well done, Jandar," he grated. "The female will make a splendid possession!"

My heart sank, not so much at again becoming a captive. But if you could have seen the look of icy loathing and utter contempt that the Princess of the Ku Thad turned on me the next instant, you would understand my profound depression.

Her cold, contemptuous eyes traveled over me once, and then lifted away. She disdained the futility of attempting battle against so overwhelming a force of the Yathoon and held out her wrists in cold silence while she was bound and led to the thaptors.

As for myself, I was surrounded with drawn swords; my own weapon lay many yards distant. And I was so paralyzed by the shock of Gamchan's sudden appearance that I was frozen or I would doubtless have flung myself against the warriors. But before I could think or move, a lasso settled about me, jerked tight, and imprisoned my upper arms.

I have no doubt that the lack of any sound of a battle from the clearing only served to further confirm Darloona in her opinion of me as she was led away.

And thus, for the second time, I became the property of a chieftain of the Yathoon.

Towards evening Gamchan's war party caught up with the main body of the Yathoon host and rejoined it. The Horde was marshaled in order of rank, and Gamchan's place in the hierarchy was directly behind the position held by Koja. Thus Gamchan was able to flaunt his two prized acquisitions directly under Koja's nose, as it were.

Koja made no remark on my recapture. Neither did he attempt to exchange words with me, although I am certain he felt regret that I had not succeeded in making my escape, or at least as much regret as a Yathoon warrior is capable of feeling. The Yathoon have a sort of crude, fatalistic philosophy which they refer to by the phrase *va lu rokka*-“it was destined.” They seem to regard the future in a dour, Calvinist light as predetermined. No degree of luck or valor or skill on the part of intelligent beings can in their world view avert a coming catastrophe.

I assume that it was with the pessimism of this belief in *va lu rokka* that Koja observed my imprisonment in the retinue of Gamchan. And I knew that he neither would nor could be of any further assistance to me, *uhorz* or *no uhorz*. This fatalism infects the entire Yathoon civilization and probably, in part, accounts for the indifference with which they view a fallen comrade's injuries. If he is destined to die, he will die. If not, he will live. Whatever the outcome, *va lu rokka*.

As a possession of Gamchan I was tied with a noose about my neck and forced to run along behind one of the thaptors ridden by a member of the household of Gamchan. I am not sure whether this grueling punishment was awarded me out of malice alone, or whether it was an attempt on the part of Gamchan to display the slightness of his regard for his new amatar. I noticed, however, that the girl, securely trussed, was tossed across the cruppers of one of the thaptors and was not forced to run along behind its heels. That much at least I could be grateful for.

We covered some miles before it became too dark to go any further. I was trembling with exhaustion by the time the order finally was passed down the length of the host to halt and make night camp. The experience had not, in fact, been as terrible as it could have been, for I had envisioned falling and being dragged for miles, or being forced to run for hours at breakneck speed. Actually, as it turned out, since the Horde moved together in strict order, it could progress at no speedier pace than that of its slowest member, which was Pandol himself.

I have not yet mentioned Pandol in this narrative because I had no contact with him whatever during my

captivity. Pandol was the leader of the clan, the akka-komor, or highest chieftain. He had been a mighty war champion in his youth but now was very old and could not endure hard riding for very long. Hence I found the pace a mild one, wearying but not unendurable.

The night camp was set up in a deep valley ringed about with smooth, rounded knolls. As this was but a temporary camp, set up for the night's rest, it did not boast the elaborate earthworks, the barriers of packed earth that had encircled the semipermanent encampment that had been the clan's home during the months I had been an amatar of Koja.*

Once the warriors and servitors of Gamchan's household had set up his circle of tents, Darloona and I were led forward. I did not know exactly what to expect, but I doubted if Gamchan would inflict any punishment on so valuable a possession as I represented in his eyes. At his command, I was stripped of my leathern tunic, baldric, and girdle, although I was permitted to retain my buskins and the strip of cloth wound about my loins. The pictoglyphs on my chest, which specified me as an amatar belonging to Koja, were removed with an application of some soapy, slightly acidulous cleanser, and a new group of emblems were painted on my chest in their place. Doubt less they denoted my new owner.

As I was led away, I saw the girl being brought forward, and suddenly I realized what was about to happen.

The servitor who had removed my torn tunic fumbled at the fastening of Darloona's garment. The girl stared straight ahead with a cold, proud expression of disdain on her features, which were, however, paler than usual. Gamchan, impatient at the inability of the fumbling servitor to remove the garment, strode forward and seized the open neck of Darloona's tunic in the grasp of his long segmented fingers.

I realized that in the next instant the girl would be stripped bare and the symbols of her slavery would be painted across her naked breasts!

My gorge rose at the thought of this young, lovely girl of birth and breeding standing nude before the cold unwinking gaze of these stalking arthropods. Some innate chivalry, whose presence in my character I had not been cognizant of until this moment, arose within me.

Without a moment's hesitation I snapped my bonds, which were tough enough to secure the forelimbs of a Yathoon arthropod but which offered only a feeble restraint against the more powerful leverage of terrene muscles. While the warrior holding my leash stared blankly, I sprang forward and grabbed Gamchan by his upper forelimb, snatching his fingers from the girl and, in the fury of my emotion, whirling him half around and letting him sprawl at full length in the dirt.

I think I could have killed him then. A red haze of fury hung before my eyes and my hands were trembling with rage. Gamchan lay asprawl on the ground, regarding me with astonishment.

I looked around and suddenly laughed. The cadet warriors and servitors likewise stared at me with utter amazement. I had come by this time to understand that the arthropods of Thanator are not quite as emotionless as I had first assumed them to be. I had discovered that Koja was capable of feeling something akin to friendliness; and Gamchan, in the envy he displayed towards my former captor, revealed very human emotion. What I had assumed a total lack of emotion was due to a misunderstanding: humans read emotions by gesture, intonation, facial expression; but the arthropods are all but incapable of facial expressiveness save the twitching of their antennae, and their metallic and monotonous speech mode lacks the human range of tones. They rendered shades of emotion by a different vocabulary of gestures than do terrene humans. I had come, bit by bit, to realize this. Astonishment is registered by a frozen immobility and an erratic jerking of the brow antennae, which the

Yathoon about me now displayed.

For I had done an unheard-of thing. With their extreme fatalism, their almost Moslem sense of Kismet, servitors consider it their irrevocable fate to be slaves and would never dream of revolting or of seeking their freedom. The most prestigious warrior, fearless and brave almost beyond human conception, if overcome in battle and taken prisoner, becomes a meek servitor and will endure harsh treatment without a thought of protest, resentment, or anger. For a slave to strike his master is virtually unheard of in the annals of this most unusual people.

But for an amatar to do so verges on ultimate blasphemy. For how can a possession, a soulless thing, be capable of anger or violence against the chieftain who owns him?

The retinue of Gamchan regarded me incredulously. They could hardly believe what their own eyes had seen; that an amatar should lay violent hands on its owner was, to them, a complete impossibility.

I met the amazed eyes of Darloona. Her people, I was later to learn, did not keep slaves as they had achieved a higher and more humane level of civilization than that of the poor arthropods. Hence her astonishment was not at my un-amatar-like action, but stemmed from curiosity regarding my motive.

She thought me a Judas, a traitor who acted as bait to entrap my own kind into the slavery of the Horde. The human inhabitants of Thanator regard the arthropods with extreme revulsion and loathing. They are considered the most vile and despicable of all species. To be enslaved in a Yathoon encampment is a doom beyond description; hence, a human who induces his fellows into such slavery is considered beyond all humanity. Since she thought of me in such terms, due to the confusion of my recapture and her seizure, she could not understand why I had torn the claws of my master from her body. Since I had already proved myself a traitor to my species by luring her into a trap-why in the world should I react so violently to her being stripped and painted with the amatar symbols?

The moment of paralyzed astonishment was over almost immediately and I was ringed with naked steel. I stood panting and glaring about like a trapped beast while one of Gamchan's cadets, a youth named Duthor, assisted his master to his feet. It was a tense moment. I expected to feel the agony of sword-steel tearing out my life upon the next instant. And I still do not quite understand why Gamchan did not order me killed on the spot. Perhaps he was too dumbfounded by my incomprehensible act of violence to give the command; or possibly the rigorous code of punishments that served the Horde as its law contained no variety of death lingering enough to fittingly reward so blasphemous an act, and he required leisure to dream up a suitable one.

At any rate, instead of being cut down on the spot, I was imprisoned among his other treasures in the innermost tent of his area. The flimsy ropes of braided grass which had proved too weak to hold me were replaced by shackles of steel. Chained to the tent pole, I was left to languish until the manner of my demise could be decided.

I smiled wryly in the darkness. My desperate action had proved futile, for Gamchan assured me that Darloona would nonetheless be stripped and painted. And it was likely to prove fatal, as well.

The second period of my captivity in the Horde would prove much shorter than the first, I believed.

True enough, it came to a rapid end-but not at all the sort of end I had imagined!

The following day I was led forth in chains to face chastisement. The cadet warriors of Gamchan's household led me down an aisle of Horde warriors who regarded me in utter silence. The day was hot

and still, the sky clear and bright. As it was likely to be my last day on Thanator, I observed every detail about me with great attentiveness.

I felt the eyes of Darloona upon me and turned my head to catch her gaze. Her face was grave and somber, her eyes sad as they lingered on me. Then, as she caught my glance, she drew herself up haughtily and her expression turned to one of icy contempt. I laughed. The eternal woman! The female of the species was the same on this alien moon as on my own far-distant world.

And then, as I lifted my gaze to the clear golden skies to have one last look at this strange and beautiful and terrible world before I went down into the darkness of a nameless tomb, my eyes widened in disbelief.

That which I gazed upon was, of all the marvels and oddities that thronged this weird world, the most spectacular I had yet encountered.

Cruising silently through the bright morning skies, a group of incredible aircraft were hurtling straight for the camp of the Yathoon Horde.

I could not, for a moment, believe my eyes. Like quaint, ungainly sailing ships of yore they were, with gilded figureheads and ornamental scrollwork about the prow. There were three of the amazing flying ships, which appeared to be built of wood, and which resembled nothing so much as fantastic galleons from the Spanish Armada, outfitted with great flapping batwings.

They came cruising down the wind, casting enormous running shadows over the meadow and the camp, while the arthropods exploded into a frenzy of activity, racing about, clacking commands back and forth, snatching up their war bows and seeking cover.

The Yathoon camp, it seemed, was being attacked.

And, in the confusion, everyone had forgotten about Darloona and myself!

7. A CRUISE ABOARD THE FRIGATE SKYGULL

Although my arms were chained, my feet were free. So swiftly had the arthropods fled to their battle stations that I was left standing alone and unguarded. The Princess stood a bit beyond me, staring up at the fantastic winged ships which circled slowly and ponderously overhead.

“What in the world are those things?”

“They are scout ornithopters,” she said. “Have you never seen one before?”

I assured her that I had not. She looked puzzled. I reminded her that I was a stranger from a far land.

“It must indeed be far distant,” she observed, “if you have never heard of the Sky Pirates of Zanadar!”

I had indeed heard mention of the name, but had not dreamed of anything like this.

“Now is our opportunity to escape,” I said. “While the Yathoon warriors are engaged in battle, perhaps we can steal a couple of thaptors and be off.”

I was half afraid that she would refuse my assistance, and not at all certain that the Ku Thad (the term meant the “Golden People”) did not share the va lu rokka fatalism of the Horde. But such was not the case. We made at once for the thaptor pens of Gamchan’s retinue and secured two beasts.

The bird-horses were restive and upset by the excitement. Perhaps they smelled blood and war and death on the air. At any rate they clashed their beaks at us and screeched angrily as we threw saddles over them and sought to mount. I cursed under my breath and wished for the tractable mount I had made friends with in Koja’s corral. But Darloona was a born thaptor-woman and knew the trick of handling an uncooperative mount: you beat him over the top of the head with a little wooden club called an olo, affixed to each saddlebow for just that purpose. It looks very much like a dumbbell.

Thus we mounted and cantered out of the camp.

At the perimeter we encountered, of all people, my former owner, Koja. He did not seem particularly surprised to see me.

“Ride due north, Jandar, and then east along the margin of the jungle. I trust the Princess Darloona is most anxious to return to her people,” he said solemnly.

“How did you know my name, Yathoon?” the Princess demanded. He indicated the circular medallion of bright metal affixed to her girdle.

“Unless I am mistaken, that is the Seal of Shondakor, is it not?” he asked rhetorically. “If so, and since only the regnant Princess may bear the sacred Seal, it follows to my mind that you are she.”

“Why are you helping us, Yathoon?” she asked suspiciously.

Koja shrugged, or performed a twitch of his antennae equivalent to a shrug.

“Why not? I assume the ornithopters are searching for you. The Sky Pirates have never evinced particular interest in our treasures. And unless my eyes misread the insignia on yonder rudder, that is the flagship of Prince Thuton himself, an ambitious and not overly scrupulous man who might well find a path to power through possession of the Princess of Shondakor.”

Squinting against the bright gold sky, I saw that the more sumptuous and ornate of the three flying vessels bore a blue and silver emblem, a winged fist, painted on the vertical rudder fin, a structure ribbed like an enormous fan, which protruded from the poop at the aft of the galleon-or frigate, as a scout ship is more properly termed.

Darloona was still not convinced that Koja meant us well. She glanced at me.

“Can we trust this capok?” she demanded, using an impolite colloquialism that can be rendered, bluntly, as “bug.”

“We can, Princess. Koja is a great warrior, a mighty chieftain, and my uhorx-friend,” I said. As I still did not know the Thanatorian word for “friend” I used the English word.

“Come, I will guide you. Make way there, guards!” Koja clacked, waving aside the perimeter watchmen. He sprang into a saddle and cantered off ahead of us, waving aside any who might interfere with our flight.

“Koja, why are you doing this? Will you not get into trouble with your own people?” I asked.

“We have small hope of defeating the ornithopters,” he said calmly. “But some small measure of victory can be snatched from the very mandibles of defeat if we can prevent the Sky Pirates from obtaining that which they seek. No more talk now-ride!”

Koja’s guess as to the objective of the Sky Pirates was confirmed an instant later. The lead frigate, the one with the royal symbol painted on its rudder fin, floated low over the encampment on lazily beating vans, and a rather flashily dressed and overly handsome young man leaned over the ornately carved balustrade to shout through a gilt-paper megaphone to the arthropods below:

“Attention, chieftains of the Yathoon! We covet neither your possessions nor your destruction. We wish only the person of the red-haired Shondakor maiden your warriors seized in the jungle yesterday. Send her out alone and we will take her and leave without causing you harm!”

At that moment a sailor, his bright green stocking cap flapping in the breeze caused by the slowly beating vans, spied Darloona’s bright hair as we rode like the wind from the other side of the camp. He was stationed aloft on the observation deck atop the command belvedere in the ship’s forecabin, and thus had an excellent view of the surrounding countryside. We could hear him shouting his discovery to Prince Thuton, for such the handsome spokesman at the rail proved to be.

Thuton snapped a series of crisp commands. “Helmsman? Forward at ten knots! Take your mark on the three riders! Bosun! Lassomen to the forward port rail-lively, now!”

The great craft began to move with a creaking and a drumming of beating vans. Like a great shark she came gliding through the air towards us. Casting a glance back over my shoulder, I could see the brightwork of her prow, and the frowning face of the vengeful warrior that was her figurehead.

Just as we reached the edge of the jungle her shadow fell over us. I thought the overhanging boughs would shield us from the lasso gang, and I also thought we would make better time if we rode along the edge of the jungle rather than pushing into her depths. Both guesses proved somewhat less than inspired. For we came to an open space where no branches afforded protection above, and the flying loops came hurtling down to snap about us.

Squealing and kicking, Darloona was hauled out of her saddle like a hooked mackerel. A second lasso caught Koja around his middle and he went flipflopping upwards, his face solemn and expressionless.

I, too, was roped and drawn skyward. A smooth hull, every chink tightly caulked with a rubbery gumlike substance, swept past me as I was drawn up. Then the deck rail, its supporters carved into the likeness of winged dolphins, swept under me, and I was dropped with a resounding thud to the deck. I saw then that the lasso was affixed to a tall davit which protruded over the side, something like a gallows.

Prince Thuton strode forward, beaming smiles. He was a young man, rather foppish, dressed in tight bottle-green breeches, floppy-topped skyboots, and a frilly white blouse, trimmed with lace at throat and wrist. A rapier hung from his baldric, which flashed with gems. As I got a close-up look at him, I discovered that the Sky Pirates, although fully human as far as I could see, had distinct racial differences

from the Ku Thad.

To be precise, instead of tawny and honey-colored, his skin was papery white; instead of flaming red, his hair, worn long and ringleted, was sleek and black, as were his unslanted eyes. He was a handsome fellow, if a little soft in the face, with a brilliant smile and a smooth voice and charming manners. He looked and acted for all the world like some delicate French privateer of aristocratic birth. His eyes lingered for just a moment on Darloona's naked breasts; in the next, he had whipped a scarlet cloak off the shoulders of his lieutenant and draped it about the girl.

He made a profound bow, clicking his heels together like a Nazi officer in a World War II movie.

"My dear Princess! I bid you welcome to the flag frigate Skygull: its crew and officers are your servants to command. As for Thuton, Prince of Zanadar, who stands before you, he is-your slave!"

It was, I must admit, a pretty speech. Then why did my blood boil as I saw the half-smile Darloona turned on this smooth-faced Sky Pirate, and the gratitude in her voice as she thanked him for his courtesy?

As for myself, I was fighting mad. I came to my feet, kicking out of the lasso, ready for blood.

"We don't need your help!" I yelled. "We were doing just fine! I am returning Darloona to her people, and can get along on my own."

Prince Thuton elevated a polite eyebrow at me.

"And who is this . . . person?" he inquired.

The girl cast me a reproving look. Then, disdainfully, "Some nameless barbarian, a slave of the Yathoon. Please pay no attention to his hasty words -he is very rude and has no conception of civilized behavior."

"So? A turn at the wheels will teach him better manners. Come, dear Princess: I have prepared a light buffet in my cabin-toasted biscuits and a light wine, spiced meat cubes and a scrap of salad-nothing fancy."

You are too kind, Prince Thuton," she murmured. He offered his arm and they turned to go, ignoring poor Koja and myself.

"Don't go with him, Darloona!" I fumed. "Don't listen to him! You know what Koja said-he has some political motive in wanting to capture you--"

Thuton turned a stern eye on me. Darloona flushed indignantly.

"Silence, you-you-amatar!" she snapped. "If you are not capable of feeling gratitude to a noble gentleman who has just rescued you from the perils of the trackless jungle, at least refrain from the insult of openly impugning his motives."

"Presently this fellow will grow tiresome, and I fear I shall have to teach him his place," Thuton purred, an ominous note in his suave voice.

Koja plucked at my arm, but I shrugged him off bad-temperedly.

“Anytime you feel like giving me a lesson, Prince!”

He stopped, turned, and stood with arms akimbo, looking me up and down. In what seemed a deliberately insulting way, his eyes lingered on the amatar glyphs painted across my chest.

“I am hardly accustomed to being insulted on my own deck,” he said. “Presently, I fear Thuton of Zanadar must instruct you in the maintenance of your temper, fellow!”

“Jandar of-of-of Thanator is ready whenever you are!” I blustered, chest heaving with the intensity of my emotion. He elevated a polite eyebrow again.

“Really, my dear Princess, this barbarian is absurd! Now he takes all the world for his domain!”

Suddenly he was hard as steel. “Will swords suffice you, my peppery savage?”

“They will indeed!”

I had snatched up one of the whip-swords during my flight from the Yathoon camp. I had slung it across my back. Now I dragged it forth and flourished it, albeit a bit awkwardly, due to the shackles with which my wrists were still bound. Prince Thuton noticed this and called for his blacksmith, who swiftly released me from my bonds.

The Princess of Shondakor regarded me doubtfully. “You will not, I trust, kill him, my lord? The lout did, after all, rescue me from the Yathoon camp-for all that he was the cause I was there in the first place!”

The Prince bowed, saluting with a flicker of his blade.

“Dear Princess, his life is yours-I but wish to tutor him in his manners.” Then, turning to me: “Ready, barbarian?”

I grunted and set my stance. I was well aware that this was a serious mistake; I was acting foolishly, even dangerously. This suave and agile Pirate was going to do his best to make me look like a buffoon-and I so desperately wanted to correct the bad impression that Darloona had formed of me. I cursed under my breath, and wished I had kept my temper and held my tongue.

But it was too late now. I consoled myself by recalling my prowess with the sword. I had been an excellent fencer at Yale, and there was a good chance my skill with the blade could turn the tables on this wily Prince. With luck, I might make him look the fool!

We set to it, blades clicking, steel ringing, feeling each other out. Very soon I was puffing for breath, streaming sweat from every pore, my forearms tense and quivering with strain and fatigue. I had been very, very foolish in stumbling into this quarrel. I had not stopped to think that I had passed the whole of last night standing up, my arms shackled to the tent pole. Not only was I close to exhaustion, but the muscles in my arms and shoulders were lame and aching.

Then again the whip-sword was a weapon with which I lacked training and experience. My battle with the vastodon should have shown me that I was making a dangerous error in attempting to duel with the heavy, cumbersome weapon. The flexive blade was all of five feet long and difficult for me to employ, while Thuton used a light, supple rapier that looked very much like the standard fencing Epee. His agile, flickering point was everywhere-teasing my cheek, nicking my shoulder, drawing a crimson scratch first

on this arm and then the other. He pranced lightly about the deck, while I shuffled heavy-footed and wearily. His men began to snicker. Koja looked as doleful as it is possible for a Yathoon to look.

Well, I shall not dwell on the scene. The memory is painful enough. Suffice it to say that Thuton made me look like a fumbling clown, an oaf of the dullest water. He played with me like a cat with a mouse, but with amusement, not viciousness. He could have cut me to ribbons, but he was in a great good humor, with a beautiful girl for an admiring audience, and he was content to nick me and scratch me and draw me in blundering circles and, for the final coup de grace, to sever the waistband of my loincloth with a flick of the wrist. I had to drop my sword in order to preserve what little of my dignity was left.

He left me standing there, flushed crimson, furious, ludicrously shielding my nakedness, streaming with smeared blood and sweat.

Tossing his blade to the bosun, delicately wiping his brow with a perfumed bunch of ribbons, he turned, offering his arm to the Princess. She gave me a look of genuine contempt and went with him.

All in all, it had not been a very successful day.

Koja and I were sent to work at the wheels, while Darloona enjoyed the trip in a luxurious cabin.

The Sky Pirates are a rough lot, but not unkindly in a gruff way. A fellow named Gomar was put in charge of us, a bluff and hearty old seadog-or skydog, I suppose-with a scarlet kerchief knotted about his brows and a bush of inky beard that made him look like something out of The Pirates of Penzance. He let me sponge off in a trough of cold water, dug out a ragged kilt, clean loincloth, and a sort of open vest of repulsively orange felt adorned with copper disks. I felt like a stage gypsy in this getup, but I did not protest. Koja and I were given food, some sour ale, and I was permitted to rest before taking the wheel.

These wheels are enormous flat gears of hardwood set laterally about three and a half feet from the deck, and they are located in the main belowdecks compartment. There are fifty of them, stacked one above the other, with little catwalks and platforms in layers. The rims of the wheels are studded with handles and there is a slave at every handle. They walk about the outside of their wheel, pushing forward, and it is these wheels that supply the motive power which makes the enormous wings-or vans, more properly-flap.

It took us about a week, this cruise. And I was chained to my wheel for all the world like a galley slave out of some Errol Flynn epic of the Spanish Main. I don't think that Darloona realized Koja and I had been chained to the wheel-I suspect her oily-tongued host glibly said we had been given servile shipboard duties commensurate to our social level, or words to that effect.

The week was extremely educational.

Some of the wheel slaves were captives taken in war; others were native Zanadarians sold into slavery by impecunious parents or condemned to the wheels of the flying navy for some misdemeanor, or because of accumulated debts. The Sky Pirates require an enormous number of wheel slaves, a steady supply of fresh new bodies, as the grueling labor wears men out swiftly. Few wheel slaves last out their first year belowdecks. For this reason, I learned, the civil courts of Zanadar used slavery as a standard punishment for almost everything-murder, theft, embezzlement, adultery, bankruptcy, rape, attempted assassination, fraud, and just about any other crime you could name. And slavery automatically meant the wheel.

We labored in shifts around the clock, four hours at the wheel and four hours off-a murderous pace. After my first three or four shifts at the wheel I thought I would die. After a few more, I wished that I could die. Never had I realized the body could experience such bone-deep exhaustion. As the saying has it: I discovered muscles I-did not know I possessed. But we were fed heartily on good vastodon steaks washed down with a ration of some fierce red wine. And unlike the slaves at the oarlocks of an old-time galley back on Earth, the huge compartment wherein we labored and in whose corners we slept were not black stinking holes. Wide-open louvers in the upper works permitted a bracing flood of cold fresh air to circulate. In time I began to harden; my shoulders toughened and my back, belly, and chest began to develop steely thews.

Between shifts I talked with my fellow slaves. They were a motley crew, about half of them black-haired Zanadarians with paper-white complexions, the rest from every tribe and nation across the breadth of Thanator. There were silver-gray, chitin-clad Yathoon such as Koja, although, as it happened, they came from various of his rival clans and there were none of his own people at the wheels of the frigate. But there were many of the honey-skinned, redheaded Ku Thad with their slanted emerald eyes. Beyond these representatives of the three Thanatorian races I had already encountered during the course of my travels and adventures across the surface of the jungle moon, there were others from peoples I had not yet met, including many from a squat, dour-faced race who had lank, colorless hair, swarthy, greasy skins, and yellow eyes. These, I was told, were members of a bandit army called the Chac Yuul, the Black Legion. I will have quite a bit more to say of them before my tale is told.

We were en route to Zanadar, the city of the Sky Pirates. Scuttlebutt had it that the glib-tongued, wily Pirate Prince had persuaded Darloona that he wished to help her people against their foes, but to do so must first return to the Cloud Kingdom to marshal his forces. Scuttlebutt also had it that Thuton was wooing her for all he was worth, with an eye towards uniting the two realms. I ground my teeth at this information, and entertained some bitter thoughts of what I would like to do to the Sky Pirate when next I had him at sword's point.

Talking to the wheel slaves helped fill in the blanks in my background information. There were enormous areas in which I was completely ignorant.

I learned that the planet, or moon, was largely land surface. Thanator has two inland seas. The larger of these, Corund Laj, the Greater Sea, is in the northern portion of the globe, while Sanmur Laj, the Lesser Sea, is far to the south. The Greater Sea and its coast is dominated by a race of red-skinned, bald-headed men, merchants and traders and shopkeepers, a mercantile civilization like ancient Carthage, but culturally closer to medieval Persia. Their civilization is called, for some reason, the Bright Empire of Perushtar: it is composed of the three cities of Farz, to the north, Narouk in the west, and Soraba to the south; its capital, Glorious Perusht, lies on a large island off the southern coast which has the rare distinction of being the only island on all of Thanator.

The superb metropolis of Shondakor lies on the river Ajand, one hundred korads* south of the Sea of Corund Laj.

West of the Corund Laj and at approximately the same latitude rise the White Mountains of Varan. Hkor, upon one of whose peaks Zanadar, the City in the Clouds, is built. To the south of these mountains, west of Shondakor, and at approximately the latitude of that city, lies a colossal tract of jungle called the Grand Kumala. South of the Grand Kumala the Plains of Haratha stretch for about five hundred korads, from the shores of Samnur Laj the Lesser Sea in the remote west to the foothills of the Black Mountains of Rhador, towards which the Yathoon Horde had been traveling. The distance between the encampment of the Horde and the city of the Sky Pirates, then, was enormous-three hundred and ten korads, or two thousand one hundred and seventy-five miles.

My readers (if any there be) must forgive me for this dissertation on Thanatorian geography, which may be a bit lengthy. But since the course of this story of my adventures on Callisto will take my reader, as it took me, to most places in this hemisphere of the jungle moon, I felt it advisable to describe the location of these lands and cities, and their relations to each other, in some considerable detail. As to the opposite hemisphere of Thanator, there is little that I can say, as I have never seen it. This modicum of geographical information, incidentally, which I gleaned from conversation with my fellow wheel slaves, proved priceless. For at last I had some notion of where lay that all-important disk of milky jade in its ring of guardian monoliths-the Gate Between The Worlds, to which I must somehow make my way again if ever I hope to return to my own world. I have marked its approximate location on this rough map.

I also learned something about the recent events on this world. Some months before my arrival on Thanator, the city of Shondakor had been conquered by a powerful bandit chieftain named Arkola, leader of the Chac Yuul, the Black Legion I mentioned a bit earlier. I know of no precise terrene equivalent by which I can explain the nature of this robber horde. They are, in a sense, nomadic warriors like the Don Cossacks of seventeenth-century Russia; they are also, in a way, something like the wandering condottiere of fifteenth-century Italy. Professional warriors, banded together under a commander selected by popular acclaim, they go where they will, living off the land, here attacking a merchant caravan, there seizing a fishing village or a hamlet of farmers, sometimes laying siege to the castle of some reputedly wealthy lord, and at other times selling their swords as a mercenary unit in some war between the cities of Thanator. What had led them to attack one of the most splendid and brilliant of all the great cities no man could say. But they had taken Shondakor by surprise, and seized control of the metropolis in a virtually bloodless coup. Perhaps their warlord, Arkola, had wearied of the nomadic life of camp and march, and sought to carve out a kingdom for himself and his Legionnaires-or, even better, to become the master of a kingdom that already existed, rather than creating one.

At any rate, when the Princess Darloona saw that the dreaded Black Legion was already within her gates and that further resistance was futile, she led the bulk of her people from the city into the jungles of the Grand Kumala. Discretion is, by repute, the better part of valor; doubtless Darloona thought it wiser to avoid the massacre of her people by escaping the Legion with her fighting strength all but unimpaired. Once hidden in the trackless depths of the Grand Kumala, she could regroup her forces, lay her plans, and live in hopes of retaking the city. The Kumala is twenty-five hundred miles from east to west, and one thousand five hundred miles from north to south at its greatest breadth. You can see how easily one could conceal an army or two in that enormous wilderness, beyond chances of discovery. With nearly four million square miles of the densest of jungles at your disposal, you could tuck several fair-sized empires into the corners of the Grand Kumala and they might never be found.

I did not until much later learn the circumstances whereby I came upon Darloona alone in those jungles, battling against the vastodon; but she later told me the story, a simple one of a hunting party broken up by a pack of yathribs, the members dispersing in all directions and thereby losing track of each other. If I had not come along, and if the vastodon had been elsewhere, it would only have been a matter of an hour or two before she would have found her way back to the rest of her party.

I did, however, come along. So did the vastodon. And it is upon such small happenings as these that the fate of worlds may Bang.

It is hard for me to estimate the number of nights and days I spent slaving at the wheels of the flying ship. The monotony of the grinding labor, the bewildering succession of work shifts and sleep shifts, the cumulative fatigue, all prevented me from keeping an accurate measure of the passage of time. But these ungainly flying contraptions, I now know, are capable of making at least three hundred miles cross-country in a single day, so I was at my wheel for a week at the very least.

While this speed is not remarkable, compared to the velocity at which a terrene jet liner travels, it's fast enough for a ship propelled by muscle power alone.

The Skygull was the personal flagship or yacht of Prince Thuton. The pun in its name, incidentally, exists in both Thanatorian and English. There is a species of small flying reptile on Thanator, found generally in desert regions, called the zell. A branch of the same species can be found along the shores of the two Thanatorian seas. To differentiate this branch from the desert-inhabiting zells, the shore branch is known as the sea-zell, or lajazell, as laj is the Thanatorian word for "sea." Kaja is the Thanatorian word for "sky," hence the pun in the name of Thuton's ship, the frigate Kajazell.

I call it a frigate for, technically, being a light, speedy scout ship, that is what it was. But it looked more like a heavily ornamented Spanish galleon. The Skygull was eighty-seven feet long, very broad in the beam and flat-bottomed. It was built up very high in poop and forecandle: the forecandle rising to about forty-two feet above the keel level and the sterncandle to thirty-five feet. The upper works of the forecandle bulged out sharply, an exposed belvedere with wide, high windows giving a good view on all three sides, and a flat, balustraded observation deck on top of this. The belvedere served as the pilothouse and from there the frigate was controlled and directed. A bowsprit protruded from the fore of the observation deck just above the curved row of windows, with an elaborate figurehead depicting a winged warrior with a fishtail. Further down the curve of the hull, below the pilothouse and at about what would be the water level on a seagoing ship, were two bulging observation balconies, one on either side of the hull. The sterncandle had a similar belvedere, pointing aft, and a vertical rudder fin, ribbed like an enormous fan, was attached to the rudderstock below this belvedere. The rudderstock was linked to the sternpost and thence to the rear steering gear.

The hinged wings thrust out to either side amidships and belowdecks. The spread must have measured at least one hundred and twenty feet from wingtip to wingtip, fully extended. The portion of the wings, or vans, which were attached to the sides of the ship were fixed rigid; but about one-third of the way out, the vans were hinged in a most ingenious and complicated manner, with enormous pulleys and guy-stays which manipulated the outboard wingsections which actually flapped up and down. The movements of the vans were powered and controlled from between-decks. The huge wheels we slaves turned communicated kinetic energy through sequential cogwheels, pinion wheels successively engaging with larger cogs, and the whole connecting with the guy-stays, which were thin and strong as nylon cord. There was a ratchet-and-pawl arrangement on the wheels to prevent sudden reversal; for otherwise, a contrary gust of wind could have stripped the gears disastrously. The guy-stays wound about gigantic winches above our level, the stays communicating from the winches to the wing sections through a row of circular ports in the sides of the hull.

The concept of a bird-winged aircraft was not uniquely Thanatorian. I remembered that the Renaissance genius of Leonardo da Vinci, however, had not been able to invent a practical model of such a craft although his notebooks are filled with elaborate drawings of ornithopters. Weight and motive power were the main problems.

I was fascinated by the ingenuity with which the Zanadarians made practical the use of genuine ornithopters. For example, the flying frigates were not, as I had thought at first, made of wood at all, but of specially treated paper. Huge sheets of strong woven-reed papyrus were soaked in glue and stretched over plaster forms, layer after layer. When baked dry in brick ovens and stripped from their forms, the result was something like sections of molded plastic. The glue-impregnated paper hulls were incredibly thin, lighter than plastic or even balsa wood, and tough, strong, and durable.

The entire ship was made of paper wherever possible. The beams and masts and keel, sternpost and

stempost, bowsprit and van ribs, were hollow tubes. Even the huge figurehead was a hollow paper mold. The vans, the flapping sections at least, were constructed like the wings of a giant bat, narrow hollow paper tubes, like unsegmented bamboo rods, splayed out from a center rib. Between these ribs, however, silk webbing was used instead of the glue-impregnated paper. Tough silk, tightly stretched and pegged like drumheads, was then soaked in wax for extreme stiffness, the interstices sealed with wax. Paper plates had proved impractical here.

But this use of strong, light paper construction alone would still not have made the eighty-seven-foot-long frigates skyworthy had it not been for the gas compartments. The entire lower deck, the bilge, of the frigates was pumped full of a buoyant natural gas like helium or hydrogen, whose enormous lifting power rendered the ornithopters virtually weightless. Geysers of this gas were found in the White Mountains; they were tapped, and the bilge compartments of the frigates were pumped full of gas under high pressure. The nozzles were unscrewed and detached from the input hoses, then transformed by the addition of a simple snap-on valve to pressure cocks which permitted some of the buoyant gas to be ejected at need, permitting the ship to sink to a lower level. The bilge compartment, once full, was then sealed and caulked until it was airtight. And the ships were skyworthy.

There were two masts amidships, set side by side rather than fore and aft as on a seagoing schooner. Light shrouds stretched from mast to mast, and then to the bowsprit and the poop, for the display of signal pennants and for the use of the sailors who manned the lonely and rather windy topmast observation cupolas.

The ships had a crew strength of thirty-five officers and men, and eighty wheel slaves. It was the number of wheel slaves required to power the vans that kept the number of the Zanadarian vessels at a minimum. Otherwise, with such an amazing technological advance over the other nations of the jungle moon, they could have controlled a world empire.

And if ever the Zanadarians discover the steam engine, God help Thanator!

8. ZANADAR, THE CITY IN THE CLOUDS

As it happened, our arrival at the city of the Sky Pirates came about during one of my sleep shifts.

For days we had been soaring at two thousand feet above the dark crimson carpet of the Grand Kumala. But yesterday, towards evening, we at last reached the foothills of the Varan-Hkor mountains, and by dawn the towers of Zanadar were in sight.

My wheel gang slept in a cubicle on an upper level, just under the row of ventilation louvers. Thus I had a splendid view of the City in the Clouds, as Zanadar was sometimes called.

Directly ahead of our prow, a few degrees to port, a tall peak soared on the horizon, lifting its castled crest out of the purple gloom and into the brilliance of dawn. The mountains were largely of white marl, like snowy chalk veined with sparkling gray quartz; the peak was jagged, the city built at different levels, various towers or battlements connected by airy bridgeways which spanned the gap between many of the imposing structures, looking from our distance rather like cobwebs entangled in stiff spears of grass,

twinkling jeweled in the morning light.

As the frigate drew nearer I could hear the stentorian voice of the First Mate bellowing orders through his megaphones to belay all lines and secure hatches.

“Ahoy the poop!” he bawled in his foghorn voice. “Signal crew stand by the aft lines. Prepare to display colors. Look alive at the sternpost steerage, you lads-“

A fainter voice sounded from the pilothouse and the First Mate relayed it aft. “Starboard your rudder, two points!” he bellowed. Then: “Look alive at those winches! Trim your rear surfaces-hard about on that rudder, men!”

I felt a shudder run through the taut structure and the great winches above me creaked, guy-stays thrumming with tension as the winch gang feathered the aileronlike segments of the vans to turn the ship about to port. The endlessly complex process of flying the Skygull I found ceaselessly fascinating. I would have given anything to be above-decks just then, watching how they did it. I understood that the winch gangs controlled the pitch and pace of the vans, while the rudder gang did the actual steering by shifting that enormous fan-ribbed rudder fin to either port or starboard; the whole operation was coordinated from the pilothouse, the captain’s commands relayed from the belvedere observation deck to the first mate, who stood atop a sort of conning tower between the twin masts; he in turn relayed orders to winch or rudder gangs.

Now we were coming about into the wind. The wingbeats were slower now, the great vans almost still, gliding on the air currents, the forward motion gradually slowing as the downwards-tilted aileron surfaces dragged against the thrust. Struts creaked as the frigate tilted to port, lurching a little, and the mate raised his voice in a roar, telling the starboard winch gang to trim their pitch. I shall not translate the sulphurous oaths wherewith his command was peppered.

Zanadar lay dead ahead now, and much nearer. Built atop a mountain, the city of the Sky Pirates had no need of walls or battlements or even a barbican. The structures I could see were built in a characteristic style of architecture that ran to four-sided buildings, with flat roofs and tiered levels shielded by bright striped awnings. The buildings were very massive and solid, with enormously thick walls, and they tapered sharply from base to summit; I suppose this style was dictated by the cold air of this altitude and the constant gale-force winds that whistled about us. The crest of this mountain broke into a number of subsidiary peaks, a dozen of which had been artificially leveled off and converted to landing plazas for the ornithopter fleet. I could just see railed runways on the surface of the nearer plaza towards which we seemed to be heading. At each side of the plaza was a sort of roofless hangar, like a dry dock. Three dry docks were occupied by frigates comparable to ours. The docks rose above the level of the amidships deck and the frigates were hauled into place by dock gangs pulling on deck lines. There must be wheels, perhaps retractable ones, on the underside of the ship, for the vessels obviously were landed in the center of the plaza and were slid down the rails into moorage, then secured by heavy deck cables fastened to mooring posts.

Now the wingtips flapped in a swift, light beat. With each agitation of the ribbed vans, the hollow compartments echoed like a beaten drum. Fantastic vistas of tower and airy span and yawning chasm swept past the open louver. I glimpsed rooftop gardens, bright with colored blossoms, ripening fruits, glossy scarlet leaves, shielded from the bitter cold of the mountain air behind glassed cupolas, as we swung about.

From each spire glowing pennants unrolled on the wind their heraldic glories. Tiered levels fell away beneath, disclosing glass-domed boulevards where bright-robed throngs strolled between flowering

trees, or rode in rickshaws of gilt paper and wood. This higher level, I learned later from Lukor, was called the Upper City; here dwelt the nobles and aristocrats and courtiers, with their attendant satellites-minstrels, clowns, jugglers, mountebanks, perfumers, topiarists, paper sculptors, the composers of masques, the blenders of cosmetics, the leaders of revels. This was the leisurely, affluent class, supported by the second level and its labors.

Now, as we circled lower, riding the updraft, we flew over what Lukor later termed the Middle City. The streets here were unshielded, open to the winds; the houses more squat, the streets lined with inns, wineshops, alehouses, mercantile establishments, drinking booths, houses of gaming or pleasure. Gaudy paper lanterns swung in the wind from long nodding poles: blue, copper, witch-green, lemon-like goblin eyes in the early morning gloom. Here dwelt the great Pirate Captains of the Brotherhood of the Clouds: the lordly privateers who led their own ships, or, in some cases, entire squadrons, in raiding expeditions against the trader caravans that attempted perilous crossings through the mountain passes, or against nearby cities and towns. Swaggering in belled cloaks and swash boots, bedizened wench leaning on their velvet-clad arms, steel rapiers dangling against bulging purses, they strode the windy streets of the Middle City in drunken and arrogant splendor.

Of the Lower City I saw but little: grubby hovels crouched around the bases of the soaring tiers, grimfaced guards and scurrying, bent figures, shuffling laborers, and grimy urchins. Here dwelt the slaves, the servitors, the thieves and the outcasts, fallen from the glittering heights above to this wallow of squalid poverty.

We hovered on motionless vans. The first mate bellowed. Screws turned, releasing pressure cocks. The squeal of escaping gases. The frigate trembled, sagged, hovered, sagged again, and then her keel ground and grated against the floor of the plaza. I heard the thud of work gangs racing to attach the cables. Then the squeak of oiled bearings and the rumble of the rails as we were towed into moorage and made fast.

Darloona disembarked from an upper-deck gangplank; I caught only a glimpse of her, laughing, pink-cheeked with excitement, resplendent in drifting silks, leaning on Thuton's arm as he urbanely saluted the port colors.

I trudged out at ground level, one of a bent-backed, shuffling line of lowly slaves.

The slave pens were in the Lower City, behind walls as thick and massive as Sequoia palisades. Here Koja and I received numbered tags, suspended around our necks on stiff wire. We would share a three-man cubicle in the giant structure, and would be on call for the next corsair of the skies who required new blood to man the wheels. In the meanwhile, we had nothing to do but vegetate.

For me, the transition from the barbarism of the Horde camp to an advanced urban civilization was unsettling. How like modern Stockholm or London, I thought wryly. Grubby slums cowering at the foot of soaring mansions and palaces; the distant clamor of laughter and music from bright pleasure gardens far above drifting down to squalid alleys and fetid hovels at their foot.

For Koja, who had known nothing but the life of camp, hunt, and war, it must have been a revelation. But the somber fellow spoke little, keeping to his own thoughts.

Ours was a lethargic existence. Twice a day guards marshaled us into double lines and we shuffled forth to feed at long porcelain troughs filled with a lukewarm greasy stew of odds and ends of meat, pieced out with chunks of some tuberlike vegetable. We had each a wooden cup wherewith to dip our slops out of this common feeding trough. The cracked, dirty plaster of the walls-the greasy, food-splattered floor-the scrape and clatter of cups dipped in the congealing slumgullion-the blurred, weary, dull-eyed faces -how

different from the spacious rooms with waxed glistening floors, where well-groomed officers and aristocrats in immaculate uniforms glittering with gold braid-and the Princess of Shondakor-probably spent these same days!

News filtered down from the lordly heights above. Prince Thuton had vowed to restore Darloona to the throne of Shondakor. The emissaries of Zanadar were meeting with chieftains of the Black Legion to discuss the alternatives of peace and war. The entire armada of ornithopters was being readied for an assault against Darloona's capital, unless the usurper, Arkola, relinquished his hold on the throne.

Rumors whispered a royal wedding was imminent.

I began to reconsider my early opinion of Thuton as perhaps a hasty one. Koja's depiction of Thuton's motives as base, sordid, and political had sounded plausible at the time, and perhaps were still plausible -but was I not swayed in my opinion more by personal grudge than by the evidence? For the tenor of the news was such that it looked as if Thuton was making a genuine effort to drive out the Black Legion and restore Darloona to her capital.

I hated the suave, foppish fellow. But the personal humiliation, the resounding defeat I had received at his hands, and my bitterness at the way he had swept Darloona from my side-these explained my dislike.

Doubtless, I should never see Darloona again. She was not likely to venture into the squalor of the slave pens, and her contempt and loathing towards me, however founded on misunderstanding, would certainly prevent any future commerce between us.

They said the charming Thuton had swept her off her feet, and would make her his Queen ere Year's End Day.

Perhaps it was time I stopped thinking about her.

She belonged to the glittering world of luxury and privilege, far above me. I could not have helped her, and Thuton could. She felt only loathing for me. Perhaps, I thought, I should turn my mind from her and her high affairs and start thinking about myself.

It was Koja who discovered the broken grating.

There had been a ferocious storm. Howling gale winds shook the thick-walled structures of the mountaintop city. Icy rains deluged the peak and went sluicing through the streets. Much damage had been done, so much that the usual work force of street laborers required considerable reinforcements. Every third slave in the pens was pressed into temporary repair and clean-up work. Koja was chosen from my cubicle.

He returned that evening with curious news.

A section of roof tiles had been torn away from the top of the building where we were immured. While laying new tiles by the roof-edge gutters, Koja had discovered a broken louver grating, loose at one end.

The stench of four thousand men penned up in one colossal warren of dirty cubicles was overpowering. Inadequate sanitary conditions contributed to the pervasive and unhealthy miasma. Men long penned in such close quarters were known to eventually develop diseased lungs and succumb to the spitting sickness.

For this reason, high up under the roof, wide louver-shuttered windows had been cut in the walls. Thick gratings of iron rods, clamped to the stone in brackets, kept the windows from serving as a mode of escape.

One of these gratings had broken. The damp had eaten into the outer plaster facing, corroding the iron bolts which had not been replaced for decades.

Koja solemnly reported that with a bit of luck, perfect timing, and the inattention of the guards, a man could climb out through the grating. But it would take two men to effect the escape—one to hold the heavy grating open, while the other slithered through.

“But once through, then what?” I objected. “How do you climb down the sheer wall?”

“That is not the way,” he said, his harsh tones low so that none could overhear. “From the window, a man could climb up to the roof ledge, which is only a few feet above the top of the louver. And the roof of the slave pens connects with other buildings and higher tiers by means of those aerial bridgeways we glimpsed as the frigate descended to moor. It should not be difficult for one as strong as Jandar.”

We discussed the notion further; in the end we decided to try it. Even should the attempt result in our demise, such an outcome was preferable to a short, dreary life at the wheel.

We resolved, in fact, to attempt our escape that very night. Delay might well foil our chances, for at any time an ornithopter might require wheel slaves for a voyage.

We slept in flimsy cubicles which extended, one after another, around the succession of balconies which lined the walls of the huge room. Wheel slaves are not chained, and their activities are kept under the most cursory observation. I do not know whether this is because the enervating and monotonous drudgery of wheel labor is believed to break morale and crush spirit to the point at which a wheel slave is incapable of seeking to escape, or whether the deadly *va lu rokka* philosophy is shared by other races of Thanator besides the Yathoon arthropods. However, it is fortunate for Koja and me that such is the case. Guards stroll about the balconies at irregular intervals, but in the hours between midnight and dawn they tend to congregate in the guardhouse, swapping erotic boasts and swigging a potent liquor called *quarra* with their comrades-in-arms, to the neglect of their regular rounds. Hence we selected two o'clock in the morning as the best time for our escape.

When daylight died, the guards lit flickering oil lamps, sealed against tampering and pinned to the wall with iron brackets. Koja and I retired to our pallets, yawning as if overpoweringly sleepy, and stretched out. All about us slaves scratched, grumbled, spat, prepared to retire.

For hours we lay motionless, pretending to sleep. From time to time a guard ambled by, starting on the lowest tier of balconies, circling the huge dim room, ascending by creaking ladders to the next tier, thus passing all cubicles. After the third such complete tour, the rounds became perfunctory, and the upper balconies were unvisited.

At the agreed time, Koja and I slunk silently from our cubicle, and ascended as unobtrusively as possible to the highest level. Here all was dark, and few eyes could have seen us had anyone been awake at this hour. We clambered as quietly as possible to the top of an unoccupied cubicle directly below the louvered window. Koja, whose long arms gave him greater reach, was elected to hold open the heavy grating while I, the more agile of the two, climbed upon his upper thorax and wriggled through the opening. Luckily the Zanadarian mode of architecture uses very thick masonry; and thus the jamb of the window was two feet wide, affording me plenty of room to stand.

I climbed out. Koja lowered the grill back into place, so that I could use the bars of the grating as the rungs of a ladder. It was not difficult to climb up to the roof from the top of the grating, using the slats of the louver for extra footing.

The night was clear and cold. Europa, which the Thanatorians call Ramavad, was aloft, a luminous globe of frosty azure-silver. Neither of the two other large moons had yet ascended the night skies, but Jupiter's smallest and inmost moon, tiny Amalthea, hung like a throbbing flake of gold against the dark. To the natives of Thanator, it is Juruvad, the "Little Moon."

The roof thrust out sharply in an overhanging ledge. Anchoring one arm over this abutment, I bent to assist Koja. I had bound a strip torn from my loincloth to the barred grating, and now I pulled on this, opening the grille so that my companion could climb out. ,

But even as I did so, and as Koja thrust his head and one segmented arm through the opening, the sound of angry cries and thudding feet came to me from within.

And so our escape was discovered. Hanging there above the street, one arm hooked over the edge of the roof, the other holding the barred grating free, my toes braced against the topmost slat of the louver, there was little I could do to aid my comrade. I urged him to hurry, to climb up on the jamb. But guards had seized his lower limbs and in a moment they had dragged him back into the pens.

He turned one last solemn gaze on me before vanishing from my sight. And he spoke one last farewell.

"The Lords of Gordrimator be with you, Jandar! Do not attempt to help me. Now you must seek your own freedom--"

"Koja!" I cried.

His last words were: "Save yourself! And thus I discharge my uhorz--"

And then they dragged him from the window.

I hung between earth and heaven, wishing there was something I could do to help him. But then the snarling visage of a guard thrust through the grating, the silver luminance of Ramavad gilding his copper helm while he jabbed a long spear at my legs.

It would do Koja no good if I were slain or captured. I kicked free of the louver and clambered up over the edge of the roof. The grating I let slam back: it caught the guard full in the face and I heard him fall with thump and clatter.

Safe on the roof, I climbed to my feet and looked around me. A feeling of grim despair possessed my heart. Never in all my months on Thanator had I been so completely alone as at this moment.

My only friend in the hands of the guards of Zanadar, I was alone and without a weapon in a strange, unfamiliar city, surrounded by enemies.

9. I ESCAPE FROM THE SLAVE PENS

The roof was flat and bare. Two of the airy skywalks connected it to adjoining structures. But before I could even begin to make my way towards one of them, I was under attack and fighting for my life.

The strident clamor of an alarm gong sounded within the huge building. And now, racing across the roof to challenge me came a burly guard, his dark cloak floating out behind him like immense wings, the naked glitter of a rapier in his hand.

I was unarmed and nearly naked, but I ducked under his stroke. The sword sang past my ear as I drove my fist into his belly. He doubled over, grunting, and I lifted his heels two inches off the roof with a right to the jaw. He fell heavily, his head wobbling loosely, and I saw that I had slain him.

I had known that my muscular strength was far superior to that of the Yathoon arthropods, but I had not realized my superiority to the human natives as well. The gravity of Thanator is somewhat less than that of Earth: not much, but there is a discernible difference. But it would seem that even that slight variance makes a measurable increase of strength in one born and raised under the heavier gravitational pull. For my blow had broken the fellow's neck.

I had no time just then to mourn the guard's demise, even if I had felt the inclination. I am no pacifist, and in fact I am perfectly ready and willing to kill an enemy seeking to strike down an unarmed man with a swordblade, especially when that man is myself. I bent over his body and began stripping him, exchanging my ragged slave clout for his high-necked, open-throated leathern tunic with the blazon of Zanadar on the breast. Where there is one guard there may soon be two, and if I must fight for my life and freedom I prefer doing it clad in fighting harness.

In half a minute I had donned his tunic, buskins, girdle, baldric, helmet, and cloak. Wrapping my old loincloth about his middle, I tipped his corpse over the edge of the roof and heard him thud against the cobbles far below. The discovery of a slave corpse by guards seeking an escaped slave might delay pursuit by an appreciable fraction of time, perhaps permitting me to complete my escape.

In the pallor of moonlight I hoped to pass scrutiny as a Zanadorian. The copper helm would cover my unusual yellow hair and the eye-shield of the helm would hide my blue eyes, and there was nothing I could do about the tan of my skin except hope that no one would notice.

I crossed the roof swiftly and made a remarkable discovery.

The guard had landed here in a two-man flying gig, which was tethered to a mooring post towards the rear of the roof.

I had not seen one of these miniature ornithopters before, and thus I consumed some moments of precious time examining it. It did not bear a very close resemblance to the enormously larger frigates, and of course it was not powered by slaves at the wheel, since it was only twelve feet long. The craft looked for all the world like a kayak, an enclosed canoe. It rose high in prow and poop, with a curved and ornamental bowsprit like that of a Venetian gondola. Instead of having a bilge compartment filled with the levitating gas, it had an airtight double hull that rendered it completely weightless. The wingspan was twenty-two feet from tip to tip, and the gig obviously did not fly by flapping the vans, for, although they were hinged and could be operated by foot pedals which communicated via external cables to a pulley arrangement on the van-tips, mere pedaling action alone could not suffice. I assumed the gig was more of

a glider than a true ornithopter, and that it rode the strong updrafts of the mountaintop city.

I suppose it was suicidally foolish of me to attempt to fly the thing. But I climbed in, cast off the bowline, settled my feet against the pedals, and began testing the controls as an updraft whirled me away from the rooftop.

I was in a vile, self-recriminatory mood, and did not hold my life to any great account just then. It proved a good thing that this was so, for before the rooftop vanished beneath me I saw guards come pouring out of a trapdoor to scour the area for me.

Like a leaf caught in a millrace, I was whirled between tall tapering towers. The curved span of airy skywalks flashed past, one of them narrowly missing me. I could well have wrecked the gig during those first few minutes, but luckily I did not.

The controls were simplicity itself. Levers controlled the pitch of the ailerons and the rear vertical rudder fin. The jointed wingtips served to turn the craft in midair as desired. Whatever the nature of the buoyant gas held within the hollow space inside the double hull, it had remarkable lifting power and rendered the gig completely weightless. Never have I had so completely the sensation of flying; it was like a dream, wherein you are unconscious of weight or of effort, but flit about at will.

As soon as I had familiarized myself with the controls, I swung her bowsprit about and headed for the Middle City. If the swiftness with which I mastered the craft seems uncanny, I must confess I have had some experience piloting gliders in Switzerland, and that I fully grasped the principles of glider flight.

Doubtless my decision to quit the Lower City was a wise one. Lukor later heard that my substitution of the guard's body for my own allayed for at least an hour suspicion that I had escaped. It was not until the Slavemaster had been roused from his sodden slumbers, shortly before dawn, that my escape was confirmed. For of course the guard, being a native Zanadarian, lacked my yellow hair, blue eyes, and tan skin. And I also learned that even after it had been discovered that one of the wheel slaves had made a successful escape from the pens, no one dreamed he had made his way up into the Middle City, and the search for my whereabouts was confined to the lower levels on the theory that I had found a hiding place in some hovel. The spans leading to the Middle City are heavily guarded against thieves from the slum regions below, and hence it did not seem possible that I had crossed over undetected. No one knew at first of the theft of the gig.

I achieved the tiers of the Middle City, but only by a hairsbreadth. A chance gust swept me against the carved gryphons and gargoyles on an ornamental balcony with a resounding crash which breached my hull. I did not need the scream of escaping gas to know my craft no longer was airworthy, for she was settling sluggishly and I barely had time to hop out on one of the bridges before she lost buoyancy altogether and fell like a stricken gull into the dark chasms between the huge structures.

It was nearly four o'clock in the morning. I must find some haven in which to hide before daylight exposed my alien coloring to all eyes.

I decided to dump my guard clothing. The first guard I passed might be suspicious of my presence. I was unfamiliar with the ranks in the guards of Zanadar, and I did not know password or salute. I retained the common leather tunic and girdle, which are worn by most Thanatorian warriors, as well as cloak, buskins, and baldric. But I got rid of my copper helmet and the blazon of the city, tossing them into a convenient trashcan. The cloak was a simple, unmarked garment of dark wool, with a cowl which I drew up to hide my hair and shadow my face. Then I set forth to explore the winding ways of the City in the Clouds.

As the skies brightened with dawn, I was passing down a broad avenue, keeping well to the shadows and avoiding the gaze of the chance passerby, when I glimpsed a dramatic tableau.

A dark alley thrust from one side of this broad boulevard, like the tributary of some mighty river. It ended in an enclosed courtyard. And there a lone man battled for his life against a growling circle, of oafish opponents.

I have always favored the underdog and I have never avoided a good fight. And besides, I could not in all conscience turn aside and pretend I had not seen a fellow human battling valiantly against impossible odds.

He was an elderly man, thin and slender, of middle height, with a short, neatly trimmed beard of iron gray and a leonine mane still streaked with black. He had cool, thoughtful eyes and a good jaw, and he stood with his back to the wall, not even deigning to cry for help, his agile, flickering blade holding at bay a dozen coarse-faced bullies armed with cutlass and cudgel. His blade had already accounted for four of the bravos, who lay dead at his feet, and as I came on the scene he evaded the backhanded blow of the biggest of his foes, sliding past the other's guard with a supple twist of the wrist, his blade flashing in and through the other's burly chest, and out again with a practiced recovery.

As the hulking bully swayed a moment on his feet, gurgling blood before crashing to the pave, I sprang on the scene with drawn rapier. I must have seemed like some apparition melting out of nothingness, so swift and silent had been my approach. Indeed, the man closest to me turned with a start, eyes goggling, as I sprang from the alley's mouth to drive my steel through his shoulder. His cutlass rang on the cobbles and his hoarse cry of astonishment and pain drew the attention of his fellows to the fact of my presence.

Surprise is always a strong advantage in any battle, and I managed to slay two of the mob before a sufficient number engaged my blade. Unlike my last experience in sword combat-my humiliating defeat at the hands of Prince Thuton-in which I was burdened with an unfamiliar Yathoon whip-sword, this time I fought with a slender rapier I had taken from the guard's body-a weapon much more to my liking. I engaged their blades and was soon fighting for my life.

The elderly man to whose aid I had come cast me a merry glance from bright, appraising eyes, and smiled grimly.

"I know not from whence you have sprung, friend, but you are most welcome indeed!" he greeted me.

I grinned recklessly. "My sense of chivalry will doubtlessly be the death of me yet, sir, but I thought you might not be so selfish as to keep this fight all to yourself."

He laughed. "I am unselfish to a fault-so pray help yourself!"

And then we were both too busy for any further jesting. We fought back to back for a while, each accounting for two more of the bullies. Eventually, and just before my arm began to tire, the foemen decided they had had enough, and disengaged. We permitted them to flee without pursuit, and then turned to salute each other.

"Your assistance was most timely, indeed, sir, and I thank you for it," my companion said with a smile and a nod of the head.

"Not at all; I have always thought twelve against one most unequal odds, and, besides, I felt the need of

a little practice,” I replied-having learned by now that on Thanator a warrior always depreciates his own skill and prowess.

“I was returning home from a late performance at the theater and had unwisely bade my companions goodnight, thus proceeding alone through an area not entirely safe. The street gang doubtless mistook me for a man of substance, and I doubt not they would have been heartily disappointed had they succeeded in cutting me down, only to find my purse perhaps leaner than their own,” the elderly gentleman explained.

“And no leaner than mine own.” I grinned. “Had both of us fallen, they would have had all that work for nothing.”

“My home is not far. Will you share the hospitality of a warm hearth and a cup of wine, sir?” he asked in a courtly manner.

“I should be most glad to do so, as the night grows cold and I am far from my home,” I said gratefully.

We strode through a passageway into another court where a red and black sorad tree lifted glistening leaves against the first light of dawn. Here my companion unlatched a door and gestured for me to proceed him.

“Be welcome, my friend, to the poor home of Lukor the Swordmaster, proprietor of the Academy Lukor and its sole tutor in the gentlemanly art of the blade,” he said, offering me a comfortable chair before the fire. I introduced myself as Jandar, but did not mention a home city, saying only that I was a traveler from a faroff land. My host was too polite to ask further information.

It was a bare, spartan room, scrupulously neat and of immaculate cleanliness. The few articles of furniture were of the finest quality and the artworks, if inexpensive, were of superior skill. These were obviously the quarters of a gentleman of bachelor habits, aristocratic breeding, and slender fortunes. The Swordmaster took my cloak and his own, hung them in a closet, and left the room, inviting me to make myself comfortable before the fire.

In a moment he returned, bearing a wine service of fine if well-worn silver, two tall goblets and a chilled carafe of a light, dry wine of most excellent vintage, as well as a small platter of cold spiced meats, unfamiliar candied fruit, and the most delicious, crusty biscuits-a repast most welcome to one who had scooped greasy stew from a slave trough for the past few days.

We drank to each other’s health and relaxed in the flickering warmth of the fire. It was a snug, cozy little room, mullioned windows bright with dawn, the air spicy with the scent of some subtle incense. I felt very comfortable and relaxed.

“So you are a swordmaster, sir? I should have guessed as much from the ease with which you were holding your own against a dozen foes.”

“Aye, my friend. My name is not completely unknown among the masters of the art, I must confess; although the young nobles of this city, alas, regard the finer elements of swordplay as superfluous and frivolous pedantry! But permit me to return the compliment: your own performance was not without agility and adroitness, if a bit soft from lack of practice, if you will pardon the observation-the eye of the professional is too exacting, and I fear I display in civility towards one whom I can only regard as my gallant rescuer!”

I smiled and said something to the effect that I had enjoyed insufficient leisure in recent weeks to keep in practice. “I gather from your words,” I continued, “that the Academy Lukor is new to this city, and that Zanadar is not your native homeland?”

“Quite so: I am a Ganatolian,” he said, naming a small city between Shondakor and Narouk, in the eastern foothills of the White Mountains. “There are already two schools of the sword in my native city, hence I adjourned to the realm of the warlike Sky Pirates, hoping to find a virgin field for my craft. Alas, my pupils have been few and my earnings insufficient to permit even the hiring of a second instructor.”

Then, eyeing me with polite inquiry, he turned the subject of our conversation to me.

“But you, sir; obviously, you are not native to Zanadar either, for never have I met a gentleman of your unique coloring of flesh, hair, and eyes. May one inquire, without offense-?”

“I, too, am a stranger here,” I admitted. Then, in a rush of honesty, I went on to say that although born in Rio and tutored at Yale, I had most recently lived in Vietnam before departing for these regions.

These terrene names, of course, were unknown to him. Lukor considered them gravely, then observed: “They must certainly be far distant, these lands whereof I have not heard. I assume the people of your homeland visit these regions but rarely?”

“Most rarely, indeed,” I said-truthfully-“in fact, so far as I know, I am the first visitor from my homelands to these parts.”

Conversation languished for a bit. I blinked sleepily, lulled by the superb wine and the warmth of the fire. Perhaps I even dozed a bit-after all, I had not slept a wink this night. The next thing I knew, my host was shaking my shoulder.

“The morning is upon us, and I am for my bed; I must be off to the citadel before midday, as I tutor the young lords Marak and Eykor in the sword. Rather than make the long trek to your own quarters, will you not accept the hospitality of my roof?”

I made polite objections, suggested that I was imposing upon him, but nothing would satisfy the Swordsmaster but that I sleep in his house.

And since I did not in fact have other quarters, I accepted his kindness, slid out of my garments, and was soon fast asleep.

Thus calamity led to a fortunate meeting, and I made my first friend in Zanadar. And never again will I question the wisdom of springing to the assistance of a stranger in need, seeing how well the friendship of Lukor was to reward my chivalrous urge.

10. LUKOR THE SWORDMASTER

My host was an elderly gentleman of about sixty years, but slim and strong, straight as a spear shaft, and

he moved with the agility and elastic grace of one in the most perfect health and fitness, as might be expected of one whose craft and art is the blade.

He would not hear of my leaving. Word had' gotten about the City in the Clouds of the escape of a wheel slave with tan skin, yellow hair, and blue eyes. I would be seized on sight, and Lukor would not permit the man who had saved his life to fall victim to the first guard that came along. I knew without question that I could trust him, for he was one of those rare individuals whose worthiness and honesty are evident upon the slightest meeting. He bent a sympathetic ear to the tale of my troubles, and vowed that I would have a haven in his house for as long as I desired to stay.

The house of Lukor opened upon a small secluded court to the rear; the front faced on one of the major thoroughfares of the Middle City. It was two stories high, the first story given over to Lukor's living quarters, and the second story, an enormous empty loft, to the fencing school he managed. This was a large high-ceilinged room, one wall lined with floor-to-ceiling mirrors, the other covered with pegs and racks from which depended fencing masks, padded gloves and tunics, and a variety of swords. Sabers, foils, rapiers, cutlasses, swords, and daggers of every description hung there, kept in perfect condition. Not a fleck of rust or speck of dust was to be found.

Lukor had few pupils and his academy barely managed to survive. The sons of a few merchants and innkeepers, with pretensions towards gentility, came to him every other day for brief lessons. And twice a week he made the long trek to the royal citadel in the Upper City where he gave private lessons to a couple of lordly young courtiers too proud to descend to the Middle City for tutelage.

As I could not hope to remain invisible to all eyes, my newfound friend prevailed upon his friend Irivor for cosmetics. Irivor worked backstage at one of the theaters in the Middle City, which produced adventure melodramas featuring considerable swordplay and thus required a resident fencing master to train the actors in the art. Through his colleague, Lukor obtained a bleaching cream which turned my skin milk white, and a hair dye with which my yellow locks were transformed to silken black. Naught could be done to disguise the unusual color of my eyes; however, the rest of me could be made over in the likeness of the average citizen of Zanadar.

On days when Lukor had no pupils, he tested my skill in the mirror-walled fencing room. I was interested to see how the art of the blade, as practiced upon the jungle moon, differed from terrene tradition. We stripped to the waist, our features protected by fencing masks, selected slim rapiers with button-guarded tips, and set to.

As I watched Lukor with a sword in his hand, it was difficult to realize that he was sixty years old; his light, spare frame moved with extraordinary grace and elasticity. He had a wrist of supple steel and an arm that never tired. Within moments the room echoed with the click and slither of steel on steel.

I suppose that any two worlds inhabited by human beings using basically the same kind of sword will invent virtually identical modes of swordplay. At any rate, I saw that the Thanatorians knew the ward of tierce, the coupe, the eight guards, and even the *quinte par dessus les armes*-which have been common in the art of fence on Earth for centuries. One after another I tried all the tricks I knew, only to watch as Lukor disengaged or parried with magical ease. He was immune to double and triple feints, and to the most advanced tactics with which I was familiar.

We broke for a rest period and refreshed ourselves with chilled wine. I, the younger and stronger man, my thews toughened from a week at the slave wheels, found I was covered with a sheen of perspiration and was breathing heavily, while my elderly opponent was calm and unruffled. It was humiliating: I had not touched him once.

As we opened the second bout, I began with a swift glizade. For a moment our blades clashed and rang together, a blur of flashing steel, the large empty room resounding to the chiming song of steel on steel. Then from a low engagement in sixte I stretched forward to lunge in tierce. My blade glided past his parry with a supple twist and I was lucky enough to touch him above the heart.

We disengaged and sprang apart. Lukor was laughing delightedly, his keen eyes sparkling.

“Well played, my young friend! That was superb-my compliments! I had not expected you should be able to touch me at least until the third bout. You have a gift for the fence, and you have obviously studied under a master.”

“A lucky stroke, nothing more,” I said, attempting to sound modest, although actually I was glowing with satisfaction. He shook his head appraisingly.

“ ‘Twas luck in part, but only in part. You have a good wrist, a steady arm, and a cool head. You are able to think and plan while engaged, and these are the essentials of a master swordsman. With practice and training you will acquire the only thing you lack at present-which is science. Come-once again?”

I did not manage to touch him in the third bout, and by the fourth I was shaking with exhaustion. We called it a day.

Guards were still combing Zanadar for the runaway slave, and rumor had it that Prince Thuton was particularly anxious that I should be taken. So it was decided that I stay on with my new friend. I felt a trifle uncomfortable at sleeping in his spare bed and eating at his table without being able to repay my debt to him in any way. Lukor, the most tactful and chivalrous of gentlemen, soon became aware of this and so suggested that I lend him assistance with his pupils. There were so few of these that it seemed superfluous to add a second tutor, but he explained that a few novices were always coming in fresh, and while he gave advanced training to his more experienced pupils it would spare him much if he could rely on me to teach the newcomers the rudiments of the art. As my disguise was sufficient to protect me from chance discovery, we decided to pass me off as his nephew, newly come from Ganatol. My new name was Lykon.

One day followed another without incident. Between my training of the novices and my periods of advanced practice under Lukor I was rapidly developing into a brilliant swordsman, as Lukor often remarked himself.

These were happy days-my happiest on Thanator -and I look back on them fondly. Between work and practice and training, we relaxed at a wineshop frequented by theater people, jugglers, mountebanks, and magicians. Sometimes we spent the evening at the theater, and sometimes we strolled in the pleasure gardens of the Upper City into which Lukor was permitted to pass by virtue of possession of a medallion which gave him entree to the citadel for his private lessons.

As my plans were vague, I remained at the Academy Lukor for the better part of a month. The fortunes of the Princess of Shondakor were now in hands better equipped than my own to render assistance to her cause; my only other friend, Koja, was doubtless dead. I had no plans for the future save for a dim hope of somehow finding my way back to the Gate Between The Worlds.

And that hope was extremely dim. Two thousand miles of mountain and jungle lay between the City in the Clouds and the circle of monoliths that was my one hope of ever returning to Earth. Alone and on foot it seemed an impossible task.

So I stayed. And, while waiting for some chance to offer itself, I was well on my way to becoming a great swordsman.

My discovery of the secret botte came about as follows.

One evening I had gone to the theater as the guest of one of my young pupils, the son of a prominent merchant. Lukor, that night, was host to his friend Irivor; as the play that night was a romantic comedy devoid of swordplay, the fencing master had a night off. The old comrades usually got together at least once a week to drink a few bottles and chuckle over old times.

Returning home alone in the small hours, I found neither my host nor his friend in the living quarters; but from the practice hall above I heard the ring and slither of blades. I went up the stairs and found the two in their cups, stripped to the waist, industriously plying their flickering rapiers and bawling ribald commentary on the other's style.

For a few minutes, grinning, I watched the duel unseen. Then fat, red-faced Irivor made some stinging remark that touched Lukor to momentary rage. As I watched, the Swordmaster executed a very adroit and rapid action which ended with his button-tip tapping the astounded Irivor above the heart.

Never had I seen that deft and dazzlingly swift bit of strategy, and it puzzled me. The next day I asked Lukor about it, and he was shocked and somehow taken aback that I had witnessed the action. When I pressed, he admitted that he should not have used that attack even in playful bout. Indeed, he would not have, had he not been in his cups and had not the boisterous Irivor taunted him until he lost his selfcontrol.

"It is a secret botte, known only to the greatest Swordmasters, and never taught or even demonstrated to ordinary pupils," he confessed shamefacedly. "You will understand, Jandar, that a teacher in the art of fence is forbidden to duel, as to pit his superior professional skill against an ordinary swordsman would be tantamount to murder. Some generations ago a great Swordmaster named Kamad of Tharkol discovered a secret botte that is invincible-the Botte of Kamad, we term it, and it is a secret of the profession.

I am forbidden even to discuss the matter, so I will ask you not to press me further."

Of course, as was only good manners, I agreed not to embarrass Lukor further on this point. But I could not help being intrigued by my discovery. I tried to remember the exact sequence of moves that I had seen Lukor make. You will understand that by this time I had been breathing, eating, sleeping, and living swordsmanship for every day of the past month, and I was by now trained in all the finer points of the art. Alone before the mirrors, I practiced what I could recall of Kamad's Botte, and one afternoon Lukor caught me thus engaged. I flushed crimson, but he waved my embarrassment away, saying my curiosity was natural enough. And then, because it was obvious I was not going to forget about the secret attack, he set out to teach it to me.

The art of fence consists of a sequence of attacks and parries, a succession of disengages from one line into another. You attack and your opponent parries the attack; as you recover, he attacks; you parry and make another attack, and so on. Where superior skill comes into the picture is through a higher knowledge of the forms and varieties of attack and parry, and the ability to think while fighting.

Lukor patiently instructed me in the secret botte, which was at once staggeringly simple and remarkably sophisticated. As the Thanatorian fencing terms would be meaningless to my reader I shall render his

instruction in the comparable terrene terms for the art of fence, insofar as I am able to recall them correctly.

“First, Jandar, you engage in tierce, which your foe will most likely counter with a demi-contre. Next you counter with a thrust in quinte, and when it is parried, you reenter lower-thus-and, as you are parried your foe will be slightly off balance and his arm here, his point there. As you can see, it is remarkably difficult for him to recover in time to parry your next thrust-and, if you lunge with your point in carte, it is physically impossible.”

We practiced the action. It was incredibly beautiful in its simplicity. And it was foolproof. I said as much.

“Quite so. For that reason, the Swordmasters’ Guild have kept it a carefully guarded professional secret. Armed with this simple technique, you can overcome any swordsman alive—even another Swordmaster who, however well he knows the trick, is physically unable to counter it. Most masters think it preferable to enter into a series of four passes and then to strike on the fourth disengage. Or, if you like, you can thrust on the fifth, but that is pressing it a bit.”

“Master—could not the botte be employed after a double feint just as well?”

Lukor’s eyes flashed with approval.

“Ah! Very good. You are thinking, Jandar! Yes, it can follow a double or even a triple feint, if you are pressed for time and doubt if you have leisure for the entire sequence. But now I must enjoin you to secrecy as regards the Botte of Kamad. I do not ask you to promise me that you will never use it in a duel, for when one’s life is at stake, such vows are foolish. But I ask on your honor that you will never divulge the botte to another.”

Although with my disguise I could come and go as I pleased, Lukor was still my major link with the outside world; especially with the Upper City.

I should perhaps have explained earlier that the old Swordmaster was no friend of Thuton’s regime. The Prince had succeeded to his father’s throne only a year or two before, and Thuton’s father, Gryphar, had himself been a rogue, usurping the throne and slaying the last member of the true Zanadarian dynasty in a palace coup. Lukor had supported the old king of the previous dynasty, and considered himself an enemy of the present family of usurpers, paying only lip service to his Vow of Fealty to Prince Thuton, whom he disliked and distrusted.

To Lukor I had disclosed the whole story of my recent adventures, my enslavement by the Yathoon Horde, my rescue of the Princess Darloona from the attack of the vastodon, our capture by the komor Gamchan, our escape and capture anew by the frigate Skygull. Indeed, I had withheld nothing from his sympathetic ear save the fact that I was not native to Thanator.

He often returned from his tutorial visits to the Upper City with news concerning the Princess of Shondakor. It was his considered opinion that Thuton was planning to wed the Princess only to have a claim to the throne of Shondakor, which he hoped to tear from the hands of the Chac Yuul warriors on the pretext of being the champion of Darloona’s cause. But this was merely Lukor’s opinion, as I reluctantly was forced to point out. I tended to disregard my own inclination to distrust the wily Prince, still hoping he was sincere in his avowed purpose of helping Darloona regain her rightful throne.

Lukor relayed certain morsels of palace gossip to me. Thuton, said the wagging tongues of the Upper City, was a thorough villain: he was simultaneously negotiating with Arkola of the Black Legion in secret

while, in the open, pretending to raise a force to lay siege to the city of Shondakor.

“Negotiations to what purpose?” I asked Lukor.

“Just this, my overtrustful young friend,” he stated firmly. “If Arkola can raise enough gold to buy Darloona, Thuton will sell her without a qualm. If not, he will win her promise of marriage and then invade with his flying fleet, conquer the Black Legion by force of arms, and make himself Lord of Shondakor. The Princess knows nothing of this, of course.”

I scoffed. “Where is your proof of all this? No, Lukor, it is too incredible. The Gods know I have no reason to love Thuton, but even he is not capable of such out-and-out dastardly behavior.”

He yielded, grumbling. “Someday you will listen to me; I only hope it will not be too late.”

Incurable romantic that he was, Lukor was disgruntled that I did not go charging off, sword waving, to rescue my princess from the very stronghold of her enemies single-handedly. I tried to argue that such things happen only in romantic melodramas, and that this was real life. He shrugged eloquently.

“Life, then, could learn a little from a study of the stage,” was his rejoinder.

Then it was that we learned of the whereabouts of Koja, and the idyll of my month in the Academy Lukor came to a precipitate end.

Every year the Sky Pirates of Zanadar hold great, week-long gladiatorial games in the colossal amphitheater adjoining the citadel of Thuton.

In the main, these games consist of armed contests between champion gladiators. There are also thaptor races, chariot races, and competitions of athletic prowess.

But the feature that most delights the citizens of Zanadar is that which takes place on the last day of the games. For then it is that condemned criminals, those who have committed crimes so great that the usual punishment of slavery at the wheel of the flying galleys is deemed insufficient, are slain.

The prisoners are torn apart by wild beasts in the arena, while thousands of bloodthirsty Zanadarians watch avidly, drinking in the last death throes of the unfortunates.

A list of these criminals, together with their crimes, is on public display for some days before the Day of Blood, as it is called, when these men and sometimes women must battle with bare hands against ferocious jungle monsters.

It was Lukor who saw Koja’s name on such a list.

My familiarity with the written script of Thanatorian was not adequate to puzzle the whole thing out. But Lukor saw and remembered the name of the komor of the Yathoon who had become my first friend on this strange world, and he gave the grim news to me.

It was grim indeed. I had thought Koja probably slain when the guards interrupted our escape. Now it seemed that his crime of attempted escape—so very against the rule of *va lu rokka!*—placed him in a rare class of supercriminal, and as such he was decreed a lingering death in the arena on the Day of Blood.

What could I do to help him? For I instantly resolved that I must do whatever I could.

There was just one chance.

It was an enormous gamble, but I was in a mood for such a gamble.

Lukor's medallion gave him the right to unquestioned entry into the Upper City and the royal citadel at any time, night or day. For half a year now he had come and gone in the royal precinct, giving private tutelage to the young nobles who patronized his academy. The citadel guards were well accustomed to seeing the tall, trim, stiff-backed old man with the neat gray beard and quiet, conservative clothing.

They would not find it remarkable that he continued to give his tutoring even during the games of Year's End Day. Or so we hoped!

Once within the citadel itself, what could we do to free Koja? Perhaps little, perhaps much. But it was worth a try. Because the pits below the citadel communicated directly with the pens of the arena, which was situated to the rear of the palace.

And Lukor knew of a secret passage through the walls

11. THE FACE IN THE CRYSTAL

It was a cold, windy night.

The cold emerald globe of Io, which the Thanatorians called Orovad, the Green Moon, burned high in the western sky, while the Red Moon, Imavad, which we Earthlings know as Ganymede, hung low athwart the horizon, and the mighty bulk of Jupiter had not yet arisen.

Here in the heights of the Upper City, the wind howled about the tower tops and whistled through the streets that climbed in broad flights of steps from the Middle City below our feet.

Wrapped from head to foot in cowled cloaks of warm dark wool, Lukor and I approached the side entrance to the citadel that the Swordmaster frequently used. The tall arch was brilliantly lit and six or seven guards were posted there. These were not the lowly copper-helmeted thugs who patrolled the slums at the foot of the mountaintop city, but the elite, the very cream of the guardsmen of Zanadar. They wore winged helmets of silver and their cloaks were of indigo silk, trimmed with rare white fur.

As we approached into the light, Lukor thrust back his cowl so that the guards could see his face.

"Well, by the Lords of Gordrinator, is it not the old Swordmaster himself?" one of them exclaimed. "Can it be, Master Lukor, that your noble pupils are so avid in their study of the art of the sword that they spend even a festival night under your tutelage?"

"So I must assume, Captain Yanthar; at least they have summoned me in the usual way, and I must obey, although I would much rather be emptying a bottle at the wineshop," Lukor said affably. The officer laughed.

“But who is this who accompanies you?”

“My nephew, Lykon of Ganatol, who has recently joined the Academy as an instructor,” Lukor replied. “Perhaps you have heard that I now employ another swordmaster to teach novices. The Lord Marak has been kind enough to express a desire to meet the lad, so, as he has never seen the citadel, I thought I would use this opportunity to slay two zells with a single dart.”

“Hmm, yes, I had heard something of the sort. So the sword school prospers, eh? Step forward, lad, and let me see you.”

I stepped into the light. For this outing I had taken especial care with the cosmetics. My features, bare arms, and legs, were completely colored with the bleaching agent which rendered them a papery white. My hair had just been redyed inky black, and black paint also disguised my eyebrows. There was, however, nothing I could do to disguise the startling blue of my eyes, so I kept them downcast, as if from timidity. The officer appraised me casually.

“A well set-up lad, surely, Master Lukor, if a bit shy. Well, pass on to your tutorial labors.”

Lukor bowed and passed the officer a coin.

“My thanks, and a good festival to you all. Perhaps you will accept this small Year’s End gift as a token of my regard. Might I ask you and your men to drink to my health on Year’s End Day?”

Captain Yanthar turned the coin in his fingers: it was a gold bice, a coin of considerable worth, stamped to the one side with an idealized portrait of Prince Thuton in full-face, and on the other it bore the clenched fist, with wings springing from the wrist, that was the device of royal Zanadar.

“You are generous, Master Lukor! Evidently, the Academy prospers in very truth! We shall drink to your health with pleasure—a gay festival to you both!” The captain smiled, waving us by. And I began to breathe again.

“Your friend Irivor will be surprised when I tell him you have an unexpected gift for the theater,” I grinned in a quiet aside to Lukor. He flushed and snorted through his nostrils.

“Nonsense, my boy!” But I could see he was pleased. A romantic to the heart, the old Swordmaster was enjoying himself vastly. For this was the very stuff of melodrama! An entrance into the palace under disguise—a daring midnight rescue—why, he was happy as a boy.

The palace, even at this late hour, was bustling. Lordly gentlemen in court robes charged with heraldic devices swept past us. Beautiful women in bizarre costumes were continuously streaming up and down spiral staircases of glistening marble. Gold statuettes and silver urns throbbed in the light of crystal chandeliers. The silken carpets under my buskins were deep and soft as the finest plush. Thousands of milky candles cast a wavering, romantic glow, faintly golden. Splendid tapestries displayed scenes of the hunt, the battlefield, and the bedchamber to every side. The odor of perfume and incense and candle wax and fresh-cut flowers filled the air.

Lukor nodded and smiled and bowed and paused to exchange snippets of gossip with half the personages who swept so grandly past. The Swordmaster was well known here from the days of the previous dynasty, and I reflected with an inward qualm that it would be dreadful if his complicity in my rash attempt to free Kojia from the dungeon pits should become known, to the detriment of his reputation

if not, indeed, of his freedom.

We progressed at a leisurely and unobtrusive pace to a lower level of the palace. I was in a constant sweat over the possibility of encountering Darloona in one of these sumptuous rooms; however, I saw her not.

At length we came to a side corridor that was seemingly deserted. Lukor pulled aside an old tapestry adorned with a scene from the life of Prince Maradol, a monarch of the former royal line. Then he felt about, fingers probing. He gave an exclamation—there sounded a distinct click—and a black opening yawned before us, into which we plunged without a moment's hesitation.

For a considerable period of time we went forth through utter blackness, edging along sideways between close walls of rough stone. This was not as difficult as it might have been—at least we were walking at a level, however dark the going was. But when at length we began descending a winding coil of stone stairs and I had stumbled three times, and had almost fallen once, I began to wish the technological ingenuity of the Zanadarians had extended to the invention of the flashlight.

After an eternity of stumbling and tripping on narrow spiral stairs we came into an open corridor. Here, Lukor said, we were safe from scrutiny and were free at last to make a light. While he fumbled, cursing eloquently, with flint and steel, he explained that spyholes were set in the walls of the passages through which we had thus far come, and that a light might well have been visible to any persons in the corridors or apartments into which these spyholes gave view, had they chanced to be looking in the right direction at the right time.

My companion soon had a small oil lamp lit, and from here on we were able to go forward with ease: He went first to light the way, and I followed close upon his heels.

“What are these passages?” I asked. “It's a regular labyrinth—I'd be afraid to live in this place myself, for fear of assassins lurking in the dark!”

“A labyrinth in very truth, my friend,” he replied. “You will by now have noticed the characteristic feature of Zanadarian architecture is very thick walls. This is partly for warmth, for the mountain winds can be very cold, and partly for strength, for the winds can also be very powerful. But the custom affords a perfect opportunity for the construction of secret passages and tunnels. These were, I believe, constructed during the third dynasty of the Zanadarian kings, in the reign of Warlak the Mad. This peculiar monarch had the fancy that his life was in constant danger and that a hundred plots were constantly being spun to catch him in their toils. When he rebuilt this portion of the citadel, he had this elaborate network of secret passages built, and he employed a veritable army of spies to keep those he suspected of being his enemies under constant scrutiny. I learned of the existence of this network through an old friend, the former archivist, now deceased. The present dynasty of usurpers do not even dream of the existence of such a spider web of secret tunnels within their very walls.”

“That's interesting,” I said. “But whatever happened to old Warlak the Mad?”

My companion chuckled gruffly. “His constant suspicion and lack of trust in his own lords and nobles eventually aroused fear in them. They suborned several of his own spies and Warlak was murdered in his own bed—by assassins using the network of secret tunnels he had invented for his protection against just such an eventuality!”

We went forward for a very long time. The tunnels twisted and turned, branching into side tunnels, crisscrossing yet other tunnels, until I was hopelessly lost. Lukor knew his way, or, at least, he could

follow the cryptic markings wherewith the turns and intersections of the passageways were emblazoned.

The royal citadel clung to the utmost peak of the mountain. On a somewhat lower level, it adjoined the Arena of the Games, and the network of secret passages communicated with the slave pits beneath the arena. I suppose it sounds easy enough on paper, but it certainly involved a lot of walking. My legs were growing weary and I was getting rather warm-the tunnels had the poorest ventilation imaginable, and I was muffled to the ears in a dark woolen cloak which served to hide the fact that a long Yathoon whip-sword was strapped to my back. I had my own rapier at my hip, of course, but I had taken the precaution of bringing along a weapon for Koja. It would be somewhat presumptuous of me to have expected the poor fellow to fight his way out of the pits without a sword. Luckily the Academy Lukor had several fine whipswords in its collection of foreign weaponry.

Everything had gone so splendidly up to this point, that I should have expected trouble. However, I assumed that Lukor possessed a greater familiarity with these secret passages than was actually the fact.

Our first inkling of this came when suddenly Lukor cried out and vanished and I fell face forward into a wall.

The barrier had certainly not been there a moment before. Lukor had been plodding along ahead of me, the light of his lamp casting his shadow huge and black over the walls to either side. But now he and the lamp had vanished and a stone wall stood before me. I called out his name but heard no answer. I began to sweat. Only Lukor knew the secret code symbols that made it possible to thread a path through this tangled maze of passageways. Without him I was completely lost.

I thumped both fists against the obstruction but it was solid and immovable. Again I called his name, but there was only an unbroken and ominous silence for reply.

What had happened? Had Mad King Warlak set traps and deadfalls along his secret tunnels? Had we accidentally tripped or triggered one, springing into place a sliding barrier of solid stone? I did not know; nor did I ever learn precisely what had happened to part the old Swordmaster and myself. As far as I knew I was buried alive beneath a mountain of solid stone.

At length I turned back and retraced my path to the last intersection we had passed, noting the code symbols-a row of blue disks. I took a side branch, hoping it would run parallel with the interrupted passage, and rejoin it further on.

The passage, however, curved sinuously around unseen obstructions, and seemed to run on before it intersected another tunnel. When such occurred, I took the new tunnel and went back along its length, hoping to find Lukor. But instead I became lost in a perfect maze of crisscrossing passages until I had to give up all hopes of ever finding my way along the route we had been following.

At each intersection, luminous code symbols glowed through the murky gloom, but instead of three blue disks the new symbols were two red arrowheads, one above the other.

I resolved to follow these for a while and see where they led me.

Hours later, or so it seemed, I became aware of a dim illumination. It was only the ghost of light, but anything was better than the unrelieved blackness through which I had been wearily stumbling for endless stretches of time.

At length I ascertained the source of the faint luminance. The light leaked from small dime-sized orifices

set along one wall of the passage at intervals of about twenty paces.

My pulses quickened at this exciting discovery!

These must be the spyholes of which Lukor had spoken. Their presence meant I had somehow retraced my steps and was back in one of the inhabited portions of the citadel again. Which meant, in turn, that I might well find a secret door or a sliding panel which would let me escape from this gloomy labyrinth into the lighted halls of the palace.

I set my eye to one of these minute openings and received a shock.

I stared into a luxurious apartment whose stone walls were hung with sumptuous tapestries. The floor was buried under heavy silken carpets of subtly contrasting colors, indigo, lavender, puce, old rose, dull silver. Instead of furniture, nests of gorgeous gold and orange cushions lay heaped about.

In the center of the room, directly opposite me, stood a most extraordinary device. A tripod of twinkling brass supported a huge orb of cloudy crystal whose interior structure was fractured into a thousand shining planes. From the axis of this crystal sphere, copper electrodes protruded, and to these were attached heavily insulated coils of wire. The instrument resembled nothing so much as a bizarre version of a television receiver.

Seated before the tripod sat none other than Prince Thuton himself.

The suave and handsome ruler of the City in the Clouds was adorned as if for carnival. His close-fitting garments were patterned with gilt and crimson and jade green. Gems flashed at earlobe and brow, throat and wrist. A half-mask of jet beads lay discarded at his feet. His hands were busily manipulating the control verniers at the base of the tripod as I gazed into the room.

A shrill anti piercing whine arose from within the mechanism. Whirling lights spun within the inner planes of the crystal orb. These lights resolved into the heavy features of a man. I had not seen that face before.

The face was powerfully molded, with a square jaw and a heavy brow. The thick neck was sunk between burly shoulders which were wrapped in a heavy cloak of some shining, crinkly-surfaced black cloth I could not identify. Beneath this cloak I glimpsed a deep and powerful chest in a warrior's leathern tunic. There was a symbol emblazoned on the breast of the tunic which meant nothing to me—a grim device, like a black, horned skull with fanged and grinning jaws and eyes of ruby flame.

The man's features were coarse, blunt, brutal, commanding. He had a greasy, swarthy complexion, his bullet head covered with lank colorless hair of a peculiar consistency. Gold baubles twinkled in his earlobes. Under scowling black brows, eyes of fierce yellow blazed with somber and wrathful fires, like the burning gaze of lions.

There was an aura of cold authority and command about this heavy, swarthy, impassive face, with its cold burning eyes and cruel lips. I wondered who the man could be. My question was answered for me almost as soon as it sprang into my consciousness.

In a suave, laughing voice, Thuton addressed the face in the globe.

“Again we converse, Arkola, and again to no point or purpose—unless you have increased the price you are willing to pay for the person of the Princess Darloona,” he said.

I tensed with astonishment. So Lukor had been right-and my own convictions had been correct all along! The suave, mocking Prince of the Cloud Kingdom was indeed willing to trade the Princess of Shondakor for hard gold! My blood heated at the oily cynicism and cold mockery in Thuton's tones, and I itched to have him at the point of a sword. The outcome of our next encounter would be very different from that of our previous duel!

In a harsh grating voice, with an odd lisping accent, the personage Thuton addressed as Arkola made reply.

I say again, Zanadarian, that one hundred thousand gold bice is the limit of my resources. And I repeat that possession of the girl is a luxury to the Chac Yuul, and far from being a necessity. For, look you, I hold the city of Shondakor with ten thousand warriors of the Black Legion-what need have I of the girl, save as a means whereby to impose my authority upon her captive people, using her as a puppet for my wishes? You ask too high a price, Prince, for something I do not really need. I am the conqueror here, and I am secure in my conquest."

Thuton laughed, a vile snigger. "Boast not too loudly of conquest, O Lord of the Black Legion," he advised silkily. "For I seem to have heard that the city of Shondakor fell to the Chac Yuul through the cunning of a certain priest named Ool and not through the warcraft of the chieftain Arkola. But doubtless this is a misapprehension on my part, and you will correct me in my error."

The grim, impassive face in the crystal flushed angrily. I recalled that I had heard something of this Black Legion priest, Ool, who seemed to be the spiritual leader of the bandit legion. Lukor had mentioned him, but I had paid little attention.

This mention of a priest reminded me of something I had found a bit puzzling about the civilizations of Thanator. For a planet, or moon, rather, inhabited by races hardly advanced above the Bronze Age level (with the exception of the sophisticated Sky Pirates, of course), the Callistans have precious little to do with gods and temples and priests. In this, I believe, they are strikingly different from similar barbarian cultures in Earth's own history who were to a high extent dominated by superstitious veneration for one or another pantheon of divinities. The Thanatorians have gods, of course, but they hardly ever think about them or speak of them, or so it seems to a stranger. The Callistan gods are referred to as "the Lords of Gordrimator," which is the name the Callistans have for their primary, Jupiter. And while they make occasional reference to these Lords of Jupiter by way of a casual oath, that seems to be about the extent of their dealings with the Divine. I have yet to see a temple or a shrine, or to meet a priest, in all my wanderings across the face of Thanator. It is but another of the many baffling mysteries of Callisto.

While my thoughts had strayed into these channels, the conversation between Thuton of Zanadar and Arkola of the Black Legion had continued, and I had missed a few words. They had been arguing over the price the Prince of the Sky Pirates had set upon the Princess of Shondakor, and as my attention returned to the confrontation, their argument came to an abrupt end as Arkola turned off his transmission. His face faded from the crystal and it became blank again. Thuton turned from the globe with a cold, mirthless chuckle and strode from the room.

And I knew that I must rescue Darloona from the clutches of this treacherous and mercenary Prince who would sell her to the conquerors of her city if her enemies could meet his price!

I forced a rather mirthless smile of my own.

That made two people I had determined to rescue -and I, myself, was a prisoner in this secret labyrinth of stone!

If any sliding panel or secret exit existed by which I could escape the passageways into the inhabited portion of the citadel, I failed to find it. Doubtless Lukor knew of the whereabouts of such, but he was either lost himself, or imprisoned, or very possibly dead-slain in the trap of rising stone that had come between us.

I soon was lost in the lightless labyrinth again.

I roamed the winding narrow corridors of stone for hours. It must have been near dawn by this time-and at dawn began the last day of the festival, when the condemned prisoners were to be driven forth blinking into the light of day to face swift and terrible death at the fangs of ravening beasts.

After endless hours of wandering, I came at last into a little room with no exit.

In the wall facing me was a barred window, the first I had seen in this maze. As I saw it, my hopes lifted.

Shrugging off the cloak of leaden despair that bowed my shoulders and made every step heavy, I strode forward into the little cell. This might be the one means of egress I sought-the mode by which I could come to , the aid of my friend Koja, who was otherwise doomed.

As I strode into the room, my foot struck some slight obstruction on the floor and I pitched forward off balance and struck my head against the floor.

I had botched everything.

I had come charging into the citadel like some hero out of romantic melodrama-charging single-handedly to the rescue of a doomed and imprisoned friend.

First I had become separated from Lukor. Then I had gotten myself thoroughly lost. And now, finally, I had knocked myself unconscious.

I fell into welling blackness, and even as consciousness left me, I felt the bitter taste of failure and defeat upon my tongue.

Koja had come to face death in the arena because of me. And now, in the hour of his greatest need, I had failed him yet again.

For a brief instant I felt despair, knowing myself helpless to save from his doom the first living creature on Thanator who had offered me the gift of friendship.

And then I struck the wall and knew nothing more.

12. THE DAY OF BLOOD

It was a sound that aroused me, whether moments or hours later I never knew.

A thunderous swell of sound, rising and falling like the sea-a booming surf of clamorous noise.

I sat up stiffly, and clutched my head. Throbbing waves of pain went through my skull, in rhythm to the rise and fall of those waves of sound.

At first I could not think where I was. I blinked about me in the dimness, seeing the small square room of rough stone. And then the memories came crowding back into my consciousness-Lukor, the trap, the endless hours of stumbling through the black labyrinth.

But this was not blackness, this dimness that lay about me-it was light! The light of day!

And that dull roar, rising and falling like ocean surf, I could identify it now. The applause of many hundreds of human voices!

Where was I?

I sprang to my feet, ignoring the throb of pain from my gashed brow, and stared out of the small barred window into a dazzling scene of circling stone tiers of seats crowded by a brilliantly clothed throng of Zanadarians-with a sandy floor at their feet, whereupon men struggled with their bare hands against enormous beasts.

This stone cell overlooked the arena itself! Irony of ironies-I could not aid Koja, but I was forced to look on helplessly as he went forward into the jaws of death!

I raved and wept and hurled myself against that barred grille that covered the small window, but it was too strong even for my earthly muscles to force. I was, indeed, helpless.

How had I come into this tiny room? I strove to recall, and it came back to me. I had glimpsed the window and strode carelessly over to it, and my feet had struck some obstruction in the floor, which had pitched me forward into the wall.

I bent my gaze downwards, and my heart leaped within me as my eyes discovered an iron ring in the floor.

The iron ring was the obstruction which had tripped me.

And it might prove, as well, the key to my escape from this dungeon of despair. For on Earth, at least, such rings indicate the presence of trapdoors.

Crouching on the floor, I closely examined the stone floor about the iron ring. The amount of daylight which filtered through the bars of the narrow window was not sufficient to give much illumination, so I used my sense of touch, running my sensitive fingertips over the dusty surface of the floor.

It was true-my fingers traced the rectangular outline of a trapdoor!

I caught the ring and strained to pull it open, while the roar of the distant throng pounded dimly through the small dusty room. Sweat broke out on my brow and I heaved at that iron ring until my muscles ached from the strain, but to no avail.

I released the ring and squatted there on my heels, resting for a moment and gathering my strength.

Then I hurled every ounce of force in my back, chest, arms, and shoulders into one great heave.

Was it my imagination, or was the crack in the floor wider?

Again and again I strove to lift that square of solid stone, my face black with effort, the blood roaring in my ears, my thews taut and cracking with the strain.

At last I heard a splintering sound-startlingly loud in the stone box of my cell-and whatever had been restraining the trapdoor gave way, and a black opening yawned in the floor at my feet. The stone trapdoor fell backwards with a room-shaking crash and I could see what had resisted my efforts-the undersurface of the trap had been coated in thick plaster. Doubtless the corridor or chamber below-whatever was there -had been newly plastered by workmen ignorant of the fact that a door existed in the roof.

I threw myself face downward and peered into the black opening, but in the gloom my eyes could discern nothing. The rise and fall of distant applause continued to beat against the silence, and I knew that I could not delay my next move for very long. Even now my brave and faithful Koja might be facing the slavering jaws of some monster of the arena with bare hands while I lingered, debating!

I slid through the opening and dropped feet first into darkness

And landed astride something enormous, and-alive!

It bucked and writhed under my unexpected weight. By instinct alone, I clamped my legs around its barrel, locking my heels together under its belly. And hung on for all I was worth. It was pitch black; as the saying goes, I could not see my hand before my face. But the hot musky smell of pent-up beasts was heavy and rank in my nostrils, and I guessed that I had fallen into the beast pens, where the wild and monstrous predators of the jungle were kept, awaiting their chance to rip and ravage the helpless and unarmed condemned prisoners in the arena beyond.

How I managed to keep my seat on the back of the unknown monster is something I shall never know. It jumped and writhed, striving to unseat me. The clash of snapping jaws and the acrid fetor of its hot breath told me the invisible thing was craning back over its shoulder, seeking to get its fangs into me. If I permitted this to happen, I would be ripped from the relative safety of my place astride its shoulders and torn and trampled underfoot.

There was little enough I could do to prevent this, in the black darkness, but what little there was I did. The jungle thing had a mane of coarse bristling hair about its neck, and I dug my fists into this and hung on for dear life while my savage steed leaped and snarled, hurling itself from side to side in its frantic efforts to dislodge me.

How long I could have held my seat I do not know. But after only a few moments of this, the sudden blaze of brilliant day struck me blind. Hinges groaned -a huge door swung suddenly open-bare sands lay beyond, baking under the clear light-and my savage steed catapulted to freedom, soaring over the doorsill to land like a great cat upon the hot sands of the arena.

I caught a swift, kaleidoscopic impression of things around me: rising oval tiers of stone benches on all sides, lined with throngs of gaping, astounded faces -blazing dome of golden sky overhead, where three

huge moons hung-level plain of yellow sand, trampled and torn and splashed with blood-and a cluster of perhaps fifty men, naked save for buskin and loincloth, gathered in the center. In the next moment my beast went absolutely wild in its efforts to shake me from my seat.

First he charged like a thunderbolt straight for the pitiful cluster of unarmed slaves. Then, enraged by my weight, he sprang straight up into the air, landing on his hind legs, his body almost vertical to the ground. Somehow or other I managed to cling to his back through even the worst of his contortions. One hand buried in the coarse ruff of his mane, my other sought the hilt of my rapier. If it occurred to him to roll in the sand, I was lost, for he must have weighed a couple of tons. I would surely have been crushed under all that meat and muscle. But his tiny brain was inflamed with red roaring rage, to the detriment of his natural feline cunning, and he continued leaping madly, like some bucking bronco out of a cowboy's worst nightmare.

A horde of other beasts had been penned in the same black pit, and they poured in a howling, hissing, growling flood of savagery over the sill at our heels. The unexpected appearance of myself, riding the largest beast of the herd, must have struck the throng of carnival-Boers dumb with astonishment, for an enormous hushed silence hung over the brilliantly lit scene. What would have happened had I not interrupted the proceedings was that the horde of beasts would have charged the small band of the condemned, overwhelming them in an instant and rending them asunder with fang and claw. But my arrival on the scene changed things considerably. For one thing, my beast was so wildly enraged by the unexpected indignity of having a rider that he ignored the very presence of the condemned, and went racing about the oval arena in wild leaps and bounds seeking a way to dislodge me. As well, his actions unnerved the lesser beasts who had followed us from the pits. They were a collection of oddly shaped creatures-scaled reptilian predators with long snakelike necks, who bounded about on huge hind legs in fantastic leaps like midget tyrannosaurs crossed in some unlikely mating with giant kangaroos. In his fantastic contortions, my enraged steed went blundering among them, knocking them about with resounding buffets from his heavy paws. One got in his path and my brute ripped out his throat with a savage sidewise slash of fanged jaws.

The scent of the blood of one of their own kind drove the remainder of the herd wild. Obviously they had been starved for days or weeks in preparation for this event. Ignoring the huddled men, they fell upon the corpse of their fallen brother and tore him to gobbets.

Then they turned on each other, rending and tearing, long snaky necks writhing, fanged jaws agape, filling the air with hissing cries like steam whistles.

I had my sword out at last and was futilely hacking at my enraged steed. It was vaguely akin to a colossal tiger, but nearly twenty feet long, with a lashing whiplike tail with jagged serrations of horny blades down the length which turned it into a terrible instrument of death. Tigerlike, too, was the snarling, wrinkled mask of its face, the wrinkled snout, the blazing eyes. But there the resemblance ended. For the brute was covered with shaggy scarlet fur and two fantastic curling horns sprouted from its flat, low, wedge-shaped brow. These features, together with the stiff ruff of fur that stood out behind its head for all the world like the starched ruff worn by Elizabethan gentlemen, transformed it into a thing of nightmare. From descriptions I had heard, I knew the beast for a deltagar, one of the most terrible and dreaded predators of the jungle.

My sword ripped and tore at neck and shoulders, inflicting long raw slashing cuts, but the thickness of its fur, and the steely rippling muscles which clothed its bulk, effectively prevented me from dealing it a killing blow. Indeed, these wounds only served to infuriate it more. Foam dripped from its slavering jaws, bedewing its throat fur, and its hissing roars rose to a screaming crescendo of madness.

In its frenzy, the brute sprang at the top of the wall that enclosed the arena on all sides. Claws scraped and scabbled along the top of the wall as the great scarlet cat clung for an instant. The arena-Boers who had been sitting in these seats for the best view fled screaming, trampling weaker or slower members of the crowd underfoot. Obviously they expected the deltagar to land among them in the next instant. But he fell back with a bone-shaking thump to the packed sands of the arena.

The thronged stands were full of mobs of screaming, people scurrying to every exit. Amid the chaotic uproar, I saw grim-faced guards pelting down the stairs, and some of the braver sort came over the walls on knotted ropes to catch the enraged deltagar in weighted nets manipulated at the end of long claw-tipped poles. I caught a flying glimpse of the royal box. There, his pale, handsome face a picture of mingled astonishment and fury, sat Prince Thuton, throned beneath a canopy blazoned with the royal insignia of Zanadar.

And at his side, staring at me, eyes wide with amazement, Darloona reclined, arrayed in silken robes, jewels twinkling in the crimson splendor of her flowing mane.

But just then I was too busy fighting to notice more.

A lucky stroke of my rapier had at last found the brute's vitals. A straight, sure thrust through the base of the skull, at the place where the spinal cord entered the brain, brought it down.

It crashed to its full length on the trampled arena sands. I sprang clear just in time to avoid being crushed beneath its ponderous weight. Coming to my feet again, I got, for the first time, a good look at the monster I had been riding, and if I had not already a fit of the shakes I might have fainted dead away. The deltagar was enormous-frightful! Imagine three full-grown Bengal tigers rolled into one and armed with fangs the size of machetes, and you will have a fairly good idea of the thing on whose back I had landed in the dark.

The condemned prisoners were hastening across the sands toward me. In their forefront stalked the tall glistening figure of my old friend, Koja. Now I tore off my cloak and tossed him the Yathoon whipsword I had been carrying scabbarded on my back all this while.

He tested the blade, making it whistle through the hot dusty air which reeked with blood and sweat and the musky stench of the deltagar. We had no time just then to exchange words-even if we could have heard one another over the uproar from the stands and the squealing fury of the battling beasts. But he wrung my hand in his own supple-fingered grip in silent thanks.

And then we turned to view an amazing sight.

The prisoners condemned to death with Koja were a motley crowd. There were papery-skinned, black-haired Zanadarians among them, and a few swarthy Chac Yuul bandits with lambent eyes and colorless hair, and even a couple of the hairless, crimson-skinned men of the Bright Empire of Perushtar. They were a dull-eyed, dilapidated, dispirited-looking lot, and from the looks of them they had been starved, beaten, and sorely mistreated in the slave pits. But now they had a fighting chance for freedom, and they were eagerly striving for it!

Taking advantage of the confusion they sprang from behind upon the Zanadarian guards who were fighting to calm or kill the rampaging beasts. In a second three of four guards were down, and half-naked prisoners turned on the others with stolen steel glittering in their hands. I exchanged a delighted glance with Koja, and we wasted no time in joining the unequal battle.

The guards were better fed, better trained, and better armed than the half-starved slaves. But it didn't really matter. The slaves had seen nothing but a grisly death ahead of them, to be crunched and mangled in the jaws of jungle predators in the sands of the arena for the entertainment of the cruel Zanadarians-hence they fought wildly, recklessly, taking insane chances no ordinary warrior would dream of taking.

And there was another factor here. The guards were fighting merely to protect themselves. But the prisoners fought for that one thing that is even more precious than life itself-their freedom. Hence it was a foregone conclusion from the first that they should triumph, and they did. In less time than it would take me to tell of it, half the guards were slain or trampled underfoot or sorely injured and the others, tossing aside sword and helmet in their flight, were running for the knotted ropes which still dangled over the walls of the arena and by which they had descended to our level. Few-very few-made it alive. But the victorious prisoners, now well armed indeed with the guards' cast-aside weapons, went swarming up those ropes themselves. As the arena seats were a turmoil of running, shouting men, they easily mingled with the panic-stricken crowd and I have no doubt that many of them found their way at length to secure havens in the Lower City.

But as for me-I had another goal.

I climbed hand over hand up the rope to the top of the wall and advanced up the rising tier of stone benches, with Kojá following at my heels. Straight for the royal box I made my way. For Thuton and Darloona still stood there, unable to flee amidst the press of the mob.

Here at last was my chance to rescue the flame-haired Princess of Shondakor from the treacherous swine she thought a friend! And here, too, was my long-awaited opportunity to confront the wily Prince of the City in the Clouds, and to take my revenge for the cruel humiliation I had suffered at his hands when last we had crossed swords.

Then I had been exhausted, injured, and armed with a weapon with which I was completely unfamiliar. He had whipped me soundly, but what was much worse, he had mocked me and humiliated me and made me look ridiculous in the eyes of the woman I-of a woman whose friendship I esteemed and whose respect I desired to earn.

Through the weary hours at the slave wheel of the frigate Skygull, in the squalor of the slave pens of Zanadar, and during my enforced weeks as the guest of Lukor the Swordmaster, I had hungered to face him again, sword in hand.

And that time had come.

13. AT SWORD'S POINT

As I sprang over the low partition and into the royal box, I heard Darloona gasp with astonishment. Turning, I smiled at her amazement and saluted with the naked sword.

"We meet again, Princess," I observed. She regarded me with a mingling of amazement and outrage-and

perhaps there was just a hint of joyful relief mixed therein as well, for I had no reason to assume that she meant me ill.

“Jandar-you?” she asked puzzledly. “It was you who slew the deltagar and set the slaves in revolt?”

I smiled and nodded. It was even as I had expected. With my flesh disguised with the bleaching agent supplied by Lukor’s theatrical friend, my yellow locks dyed jet-black, the Princess had not known for sure that it was I until she had looked me full in the face. For my blue eyes, unique among the races native to this world of Thanator, alone gave me away. And I sensed the reason for the bewilderment that gripped her. From our past experiences, and the various misunderstandings between us, she thought me either a cunning and treacherous rogue, or an arrant coward.

Yet here I was, for once cast in the role of a hero!

It must have seemed a baffling contradiction to her. But her companion in the royal box felt different emotions. Thuton’s drawling, silken voice sounded from behind me, and I turned from my Princess to face his mocking smile with a level stare.

“So, the barbarian returns, eh?” he sneered. “I had thought you safely consigned to servile labors more fitting to one of your lowly rank and savage ways than mingling with your betters!”

Beneath his condescending sneers I sensed a red rage trembling for release. I resolved to needle him a little before we crossed swords at last.

“Save for the Princess Darloona and a certain gentleman, I have not yet encountered any in this city better than myself,” I replied calmly. “And surely the treachery involved in seeking to sell your royal guest into the hands of her greatest enemies, the Black Legion, puts yourself forever beyond the comparison.”

His eyes narrowed and a dull flush stained his paper-white cheeks. I could see from the sidewise glance he directed at Darloona’s startled face that he had of course kept all knowledge of his secret dealings with Arkola of the Chac Yuul from her. He bent a coldly furious gaze on me and his purring voice lost its sleekness and became harsh with menace.

“Mind your tongue, fellow, in the presence of the Princess, and cease spewing these despicable lies, or—” and here one strong white hand strayed suggestively to the hilt of his sword “—perhaps the lesson in civilized behavior I gave you when last we met was inadequate and you require a bit of further tutoring!”

I laughed easily. “Yes, I recall how soundly you defeated me when last we stood at sword’s point,” I remarked casually. “But do not bank on our last bout too much, Thuton. Then my arms were weary from a night spent with them chained above my head, and I was moreover weakened from a wound in the fore arm dealt by the tusk of a vastodon, whom I slew, rescuing the Princess from certain death.”

My gaze became cool and insolent, raking him from head to foot, lingering on the slight suggestion of a paunch that was visible above his jeweled girdle, on the dark circles dissipation had traced beneath his bloodshot eyes, and on his foppish and almost feminine elegance of dress.

“Today you may find me in somewhat better condition for swordplay,” I hinted. “Indeed, I might succeed in teaching you a lesson or two in-manners.”

His face went hard and ugly, and his hand went to the hilt of his sword. But behind me I heard an exclamation from Darloona.

“What insolence!” she said, and her tones were scathing. My heart sank just a trifle: I had hoped to restore myself somewhat in her esteem. But I had forgotten the code of gentlemanly behavior which was almost religiously observed by the warriors of Thanator. And I had offended against its prime tenet -a gentleman of Callisto does not boast of his prowess, but remains silent, letting his actions speak for him.

Noting her reaction, Thuton smirked.

“Shall I teach this crude buffoon another lesson, my lady?” he inquired. Darloona raked me with a haughty eye and nodded. He made me a mocking half-bow, and drew his sword with a flourish. We exchanged no salutes, but engaged at once.

All about us was raging turmoil, shouting guards, screaming and milling throngs of hysterical arena-goers, and battling slaves seeking freedom. But I soon forgot about them, concentrating on the smiling face of Thuton. The universe narrowed and shrank, until the three of us-the Princess, the Sky Pirate, and my self-were enclosed in a private little world of our own, insulated from everything that was going on around us. All we could hear was the click and clang of our blades, feeling each other out, the rasp of our buskins on the stone floor, the sound of heavy breathing. I focused my concentration on that smiling white face that floated before me beyond the flicker of our blades. I yearned and hungered to wipe that smirk away, to bring sweat to that smooth ironic brow, and the gleam of fear to those mocking eyes.

At first, Thuton engaged my point negligently, carelessly. Obviously he thought he was facing a rank novice hardly capable of knowing one end of a sword from the other. I held myself in check, content for the moment merely to turn aside his point whenever it came near me, playing a purely defensive role.

But before long, as he watched me parry every thrust, he became irked at the course of our duel, and pressed me back before a shower of gliding strokes, any one of which could have disemboweled me had I not turned aside each stroke with a practiced twist of the wrist. He glared at me as we disengaged, and I smiled quietly and stood waiting his next attack.

He sprang to engage my point in tierce. I countered easily with a demi-contre, and, as I parried, my point glided past his guard to nick him slightly just above the heart, slicing through his tunic.

Darloona gasped, and Thuton’s face went all loose with shock. I merely smiled, and stood waiting for the next engagement.

He entered with a thrust in quinte, which I turned aside effortlessly-and again my point slid through his guard, this time to draw a line of crimson down one cheek. He sprang backwards with remarkable agility, staring at me with utter astonishment. I elevated one eyebrow ironically, and stood waiting for his next attack.

It was blatantly obvious that my superb and almost effortless competence had disconcerted him mightily. And he must have been baffled that I had turned neither of my thrusts into a killing or disabling wound. He engaged my point cautiously a third time, and the air rang with the clang and slither of steel on steel as he felt me out.

I was delighted to see the flushed, congested appearance of his face and the puzzlement in his eyes. And particularly pleased to see a trickle of perspiration slide down his face from his hairline, to mingle with the blood from the slight scratch I had given him on the left cheek.

He was now playing a cautious, defensive bout, even as I had been earlier. Hence, I disengaged and

reentered in sixte, and as he parried that-and failed to make a counterthrust-I extended my arm lithely and gave him a similar scratch on the right cheek!

Thuton cried out with astonishment and alarm, disengaged awkwardly, stumbling backwards in his haste to elude my dancing point. And, as I turned to face him again, I caught the expression in Darloona's eyes as she watched my swordplay.

Was it-admiration?

Now Thuton threw all caution to the winds and hurled a storm of ringing steel against my slender blade. He pressed me back with a swift glizade, a dazzling blur of steel, and I gave way before him, but not without a chuckle at his manner of fighting. I know not in which school of the fence the Prince of the City in the Clouds had learned the art, but he fought in a flashy, noisy manner-with much floor-stamping and hand-flourishing, sharp little cries and barked comments, screwing his face up in the most fearsome grimaces-all very impressive to an audience, I suppose, but a little showy for my tastes. I, by way of contrast, fought in a quiet, easy, restrained manner, with a minimum of movement or gesture, content merely to give way before his stamping lunges, and to turn each aside with an adroit twist of the wrist.

We circled the box twice, kicking the chairs out of the way. I let him press me back because I knew he could not keep up this intensity for long. And I was right. Ere long he began to get winded and his wrist and arm were wearying fast, for his blade began to tremble in his grip. He sought to disengage and rest, but now it was my turn to press him, and I slid past his guard and gave him another nick above the heart. Again I extended it into a scratch, drawing a parallel line across the breast of his tunic, slitting the material to the bare skin.

I continued to press him and a few moments later I slit his tunic at the shoulder, and next at the other shoulder-and all the time, blowing like a beached whale, his face black with effort, he was trying to disengage. When I finally had him virtually helpless, I had cut away the whole front of his tunic, laying him naked to the navel. His sword arm was trembling with exhaustion by this time and the glint of fear shone in his eyes at long last.

Thuton was a fine swordsman and he had learned from a master of the art. It was not that I was by very much his superior. But for many hours every day for the past month I had practised with novice after novice, ending each day with a bout against one of the finest Swordmasters this planet had ever produced. Naturally my arm was tougher than Thuton's and my swordsmanship, honed and whetted through exhausting hours of continuous practice, was better than his.

Now that I had laid him naked to the waist, I proceeded to cover his torso-which glistened with perspiration-with scratches. I marked him on both shoulders, and drew a scarlet line down his ribs to either side, and I was carefully attempting to write "Jandar" across the breadth of his chest between the nipples, when his nerve broke and he suddenly gave way to rank cowardice.

Squealing like a panic-stricken woman, he literally threw his sword in my face and sprang clumsily out of the box, falling down several steps, to stumble to safety amid the milling throng. It was an act of almost unheard-of cowardice, and even I was amazed. One swordsman just simply does not elude a foeman's blade in such a manner-not on Thanator, at least! Even if you are outmatched hopelessly, the Callistan code of honor demands that you stand and die, if need be, before running away from a duel. Nevertheless, I had broken Thuton's nerve, and he had showed the yellow streak. I had erased my previous humiliation, vindicating myself gloriously, my only regret being that I had not killed him.

To tell the truth my own sword arm was a bit wearied, for the duel had been a prolonged game of

cat-and-mouse, and I had not enjoyed much sleep the night before. So I leaned on my blade and caught my breath, watching him run into the safety of the mob. And I wondered if, after all, I would have been able to write my name in the Thanatorian script upon his naked chest even if he had not fled in so cowardly a manner.

The Thanatorian language is written in a cursive hand in a script made up of many hooked, swash tailed characters, not unlike a simplified version of Arabic, and very hard to write with a sword point. It would not have been difficult to write “Jandar” in Roman capitals, but it might well have proven impossible to inscribe Thuton’s breast with my cognomen, limited as I was by the intricate nature of the native alphabet. Ah, well, perhaps Thuton and I would meet again, at some later date. At which time I might again attempt to complete the little love note I had been carving on his breast.

As my blade was somewhat sticky with Thuton’s gore, I bent and used his thrown-aside cloak to wipe it clean, whereupon I returned it to my scabbard.

All the while Darloona was regarding me with an unreadable expression on her lovely features.

Such was my rather high opinion of the way I had conducted myself in the bit of swordplay just past, I rather naturally interpreted this expression as denoting intense admiration on her part.

Of this incorrect notion I was, ere long, soundly disabused. While I had acquitted myself with the sword well enough, and had doubtless corrected her earlier misapprehension of my manhood, courage, and swordsmanship, I failed, as seemed always to be the case, to read the psychology of the female. For she fixed me with a searing glare of outrage and contempt.

“I know not for what reason you dog my heels, barbarian,” she said levelly, her voice shaking with fury, “but I would that I could be rid of you.”

The world swung around me dizzily, and I fear I stared at her slack-jawed. I do not recall just what sort of a reaction I had expected her to display towards my recent battle, but it surely was not rage and contempt.

“What-why-“ I fumbled for words.

“The Lords of Gordrinator have surely cursed me for my sins,” she continued, now almost tearfully. “Why must you continually be bursting in upon my affairs, to their eternal detriment?”

I was baffled in the face of her tearful fury. I had expected praise, perhaps, even admiration-but not a storm of tears!

“My Princess, why do you-“

She stamped her small foot furiously, tossing her crimson mane like a spirited mare.

“Stop calling me that, you-you horeb!” she wailed, naming a particularly repulsive Thanatorian scavenger-something like a pink, naked rat the size of a small dog, whose accustomed habit is to feed on garbage.

Before I could think of anything to say, she blazed at me: “I am not ‘your Princess’! I want nothing to do with you-nothing, do you hear?”

“I-I hear well enough,” I stammered witlessly, “but I-I do not understand. What have I done to offend you?”

She burst into tears, turning to solemn-eyed Koja who had stood quietly through all this, blinking curiously on the scene and doubtless reflecting on the odd mating habits of the human race, so unlike the placid and practical methods enjoyed by his own people,

“Listen to him!” she raged. “Here I am, a guest in the citadel of the powerful Prince of Zanadar, whom I have at length consented to marry, and whom I have persuaded to lend me the uses of his magnificent flying navy-the mightiest fighting force on all of the world-with which I had hoped to wrest my kingdom from the hands of the Black Legion-and along comes this annoying oaf yet once again, to meddle in to my affairs, and ruin all my plans,” she stormed amidst a rain of tears.

I was considerably taken aback. But now I understood! I had, for the moment, forgotten that only Luker and myself knew the truth of this matter-that is, that Thuton was treacherously seeking behind Darloona’s back to sell her into the very hands of the same bandit legion he was pretending to be willing to battle against! Naturally, she had misinterpreted my actions. I tried to explain the real situation to her, but she stamped her small foot furiously and shook her head until her hair flew about in a flaming cloud and refused to listen to my “clumsy lies,” as she called them.

Just then Koja drew my attention to an unfortunate development.

While I had been busied, first with cutting up Thuton and then with countering the enraged accusations of Darloona, the hard-faced Zanadarian guards had at length restored the throng to a semblance of order and were now advancing in a heavily armed squad on the royal box, doubtless with the intentions of capturing Koja, as an escaped prisoner, and me, as the ringleader of the slave revolt.

All of Koja’s fellow slaves had, by now, either made their escape by successfully mingling with the crowd, or had been recaptured or slain. Thus there were only he and I to face twenty men armed with swords, bill-hooks, and crossbows-and mailed in full armor, protected by helmet and long kite-shaped Norman-type shields.

And they would be upon us in a minute or two.

I cursed my foolhardy hunger for revenge which had made me draw out my duel with Thuton to such inordinate length. Had I simply run him through when first I had him at sword’s point, we could all three of us have been out of the arena and halfway to the Middle City by now, where doubtless we could have found a haven of safety in the Academy Lukor, to which I possessed a key.

But, no! I must play at cat-and-mouse, and dawdle out the duel, so as to show off my newly perfected swordsmanship before the woman I-before Darloona of Shondakor-instead of doing the smart thing, and making an escape while I still had the opportunity.

I choked back a guilty curse, bitterly reflecting on the self-evident fact that while my intentions were usually of the noblest, the most admirable, to the point of the heroic. I somehow or other managed to fumble my every chance to do something worthwhile.

Attempting against impossible odds to set free my friend Koja and the Princess Darloona, I had only bungled the whole matter and thrust both them and myself into even worse danger than before.

But there was no hope for it. Koja and I must stand and fight against twenty armed men. It was

hopeless, but there was no other course open to us.

I bitterly cursed my own self-pride and arrogance, wishing I was dead . . . knowing I soon would be.

14. RIDERS OF THE WINDS

The guards were almost upon us. I could see the grim expressions on their hard faces clearly, and the cold fury of vengeance in their eyes. Koja and I stood with drawn steel, ready to defend the Princess of Shondakor to the last, but that last, I knew, would not be long in coming. For, however much mastery in the gentle art of swordsmanship I had imbibed from the tutelage of Lukor, it would not long suffice to hold at bay twenty fresh and well-armed soldiers.

And then a weird shadow fell over the canopied booth, and all of us looked up with astonishment at a fantastic flying monster!

For a moment-so completely unfamiliar was the aerial contraption to me-my eyes simply could not resolve the thing. But then I saw it was an ornithopter. Not one of the eighty-foot monstrosities, like the frigate that had flown us here, but more on the order of the small flying gig wherein I had made my escape from the slave pens to the Middle City.

This particular style of ornithopter was something new to my experience. It was a four-man scout, some twenty-five feet long, with four cockpits, like a king-sized kayak. And it resembled nothing so much as an ungainly aerial version of a Polynesian outrigger canoe. I use this handy comparison because the helium-like gas which rendered the contraption air worthy was contained in two long pontoons below the keel and to either side of the hull, braced apart with struts. This lower structure looked rather like the runners on a sled.

The fantastic flying machine may have looked fairly ridiculous, but it very obviously flew.

And, equally important, it was a way out of our present dilemma.

For there, grinning down at me from the left front cockpit was-Lukor!

Only the Lords of Gordrinator know what happened to him after we became separated in the labyrinth of secret passages beneath the royal citadel. I had thought him either slain in a deadfall trap, or lost somewhere and still within the maze of tunnels. If I had stopped to think about it, I should have realized that if I, who was unable to read the coded markings that showed directions within the maze, had somehow been lucky enough to stumble on a way out, Lukor, who could read them, must have made his exit long before I.

Such, apparently, had been the case. The gallant old Swordmaster had escaped from the maze and had somehow bluffed his way out of the citadel and had been waiting near the arena for an appropriate moment to help Koja and me escape. Somewhere he had found the ornithopter-probably at one of the rooftop guard stations, such as the one atop the slave prison where I had found my ill-fated gig a month ago. At any rate, I would be able to hear the tale of his adventures later, and from his own lips. What

was important now was that he had provided us with a means of escape.

The four-man flying craft hovered on throbbing wings directly above the royal box. While Lukor held it steady above us with one hand on the controls, he tossed overside a rope ladder with the other. The end of the ladder brushed the top of the canopy.

I turned to Darloona.

“Swiftly now, Princess,” I said. “You ascend the ladder first. Koja and I will hold the guards at bay until you are safely aboard and we may follow you ourselves.”

She stared at me, her slanted emerald eyes filled with contemptuous astonishment.

“Are you completely mad, Jandar?” she demanded hotly. “Why should I wish to escape from the city of my friends? I have already told you that Prince Thuton and I are to wed, and that he has pledged his aerial navy to make war against the Black Legion who hold my city—you may escape, if you wish, but I intend to remain here and regain my throne.”

Impatience made me rather curt.

“That is all nonsense, Darloona! Thuton is a treacherous liar. He has been lulling you with false promises, while behind your back he has offered you for sale to Arkola of the Chac Yuul for two hundred thousand gold bice!”

“That is a filthy and despicable lie!”

I know not how long we would have argued back and forth, but solemn Koja intervened.

“Cannot this controversy be continued when we are all in safety?” he inquired in his clacking metallic voice. “For, look, Jandar, the guards are almost upon us.”

He was right. I had no time to continue my arguments with the hotheaded girl, which were futile anyway as she simply did not believe me. So I did something that perhaps was unwise, but seemed the only thing to do at the time.

I knocked her cold with a right to the jaw!

She folded limply, and I caught her in my arms and tossed her over my shoulders and sprang up on the wall of the box, found a foothold among the ornamental carvings of the posts that supported the canopy, and thus clambered to the roof of the box from which height I could grab the lowest rung of the ladder.

In a moment I was climbing up the ladder to safety.

I doubt if it would have been possible for anyone except a professional acrobat or a strong man to have performed a similar stunt on Earth. It was only possible for me to do so because of the slight difference between the gravitational fields of Earth and Thanator, and because my muscles, accustomed to the slightly greater gravity of my home world, gave me a strength that was quite beyond the human norm on Thanator.

Still and all, it was not a feat that I would care to attempt again. Dangling between ground and sky on a swaying rope ladder, the hovering ornithopter above me looking too flimsy to support my weight, the

girl's dangling arms and legs impeding my movements, expecting at any second to receive a bolt in my back from one of those miniature Zandarian crossbows-I was never so relieved in my life as when I eventually gained the top rung of the ladder and looked into Lukor's grinning face.

"Lukor!" I exclaimed: "I have never been more delighted to see anyone in my life! Here-take the girl, can you?"

He dragged her from my shoulders and flopped her down unceremoniously into the other front cockpit beside his own. Then he lent me an arm while I climbed over the gunwales and took a seat in the rear behind him. I was puffing and blowing from the exertions of climbing that swaying rope ladder, encumbered by the weight of the girl draped about my shoulders, and it took me a moment or two to catch my breath.

But the old Swordmaster was in grand spirits, burbling with good humor. He was chattering away at a great rate, lifting his voice so as to be audible above the hubbub from below and the thunder of our throbbing wings.

"Ho, there, my boy!" he chortled. "I was not sure whether you were alive or slain, but I should have known that you would be able to find your way out of that cursed labyrinth. You have the luck of a born hero!"

He was obviously having the time of his life, the old rascal. His cheeks were ruddy, flushed with excitement, and his sharp old eyes flashed with gusto and delight, gray locks tousled and flying in the wind of the beating wings. He looked twenty years younger, and I was so happy to see him alive and safe I could have kissed the old fellow on the spot. His almost Gallic sense of chivalry and romance lent vast enjoyment to the escapade-this was the sort of thing he craved, last-minute rescues from certain death, the heroine torn from the grip of fiends, valiant warriors battling against hopeless odds!

"When we were separated by the deadfall trap, I followed the passageway to the nearest exit and lied my way to a rooftop landing stage," he continued. "Reasoning that you might well be hopelessly lost in the maze, I thought that the least I could do was rescue your Yathoon comrade and hide him safely away in the Academy, thinking that the two of us might be able to find you later in the secret passages."

I thanked him fervently for this rescue, which had come in the proverbial nick of time, and peered over the side to see how faithful Koja was doing.

He was doing superbly, holding twenty warriors at bay with the deadly flail of his Yathoon whipsword. Less than twenty, to be precise, for that flying lash of razory steel had already accounted for no less than seven of the guardsmen.

Lukor peered down at the battle with lively interest, bellowing encouragement and praise. The whipsword was the one bladed weapon of Thanator which the old Swordmaster was not adept in using, for the ungainly length and weight of the whiplike steel blade makes it difficult and awkward for any but one of the stalking arthropods to fight with.

While Lukor loudly applauded Koja's dazzling prowess with the whip-sword, I yelled at him to hurry it up. From the vantage of our height I could see guards gathering from all over the arena, and many of them were armed with the deadly little crossbows-whose bulletlike steel darts might well puncture our balloon pontoons or wreck one of our ponderously flapping wings, bringing the aerial contraption down.

But Koja knew what he was doing. Spinning about, he lashed out with the steely flail, clearing a wide

area about him as guardsmen ducked away from his singing steel. Then, folding his gaunt and triple-jointed legs, he catapulted into the air. It was a fantastic leap-he must have bounded a good eleven feet straight up. His segmented fingers closed over the middle rungs of the ladder and in a moment his lower limbs had found rungs of their own, and he came up hand over hand to join the rest of us in the cockpits.

“Koja, that was magnificent! I have never seen the whip-sword used so splendidly.” I laughed as he settled into place beside me, folding his ungainly limbs awkwardly in the tight, enclosed seat. He blinked at me solemnly.

“I might return the compliment, Jandar,” he clacked in his monotonous and metallic tones, “by observing that when you set out to rescue a comrade, you do so in the most spectacular manner conceivable!” And he gestured eloquently with a quirk of his long antennae at the turmoil below, the screaming mob in panic-stricken flight, the battling beasts, the escaping slaves, and the infuriated guards shaking their fists at us in helpless frustration far below. I grinned.

“But who is this human whose flying machine offers us an unexpected mode of escape?” he inquired.

I introduced Lukor and Koja in a perfunctory manner, for just then we had little time for words. Thuton had returned with a squadron of crossbowmen and steel darts were flickering through the air in our direction.

“Hold on, my friends-here we go!” crowed Lukor, and he gripped the controls, sending the craft dipping away to one side. We rose in a dizzy spiral, circling the arena. Tiers of stone seats swept past underneath and then the fabric of the flying machine shuddered beneath to the shattering impact of some unseen obstacle. A jagged rain of thick fragments of clear glass showered our shoulders and then we were caught in the grip of a howling gale whose rushing winds were bitterly cold.

It had not occurred to me, so hectic had the past half-hour been, to wonder why the arena was so hot, baking under day-glare, when the open streets and forums of the mountaintop city were generally swept by frigid winds because of our height. But now I saw that the whole arena was roofed with glass-a gigantic dome shielded the amphitheater from the cold air and the howling winds, and acted like a colossal greenhouse, concentrating the light of day into baking warmth so that the arena-Boers could sit on the exposed stone tiers in comfort. Through one of the gigantic panes of glass which formed this greenhouse dome our aerial contraption had just shattered its way to the freedom of the outer air.

“Where now, Swordmaster?” I shouted, gasping as the bitter cold wind struck the sweaty surface of my bare arms and legs. Lukor lifted his voice above the bellow of the winds.

“I suggest we adjourn to a friendlier clime,” he yelled. “My native city of Ganatol would afford a less hostile haven than we may expect from Zanadar, after all this uproar and rescuing!”

I was smitten by a sudden sense of guilt.

“But, Lukor! Your home-your Academy! I cannot expect you to give up everything you have, just to help me and my friends out of a difficult spoil”

He grinned like a mischievous boy, gray mane flying in the wintry blast.

“Nonsense! With what I have here-and here-I can reestablish the Academy Lukor wherever I go,” he said, indicating his sword arm and tapping his brow.

“But your house, and all your possessions!” I protested helplessly, unwilling that he should sacrifice everything for my cause.

“Poh! Mortgaged to the hilt, my boy-the Academy never really brought in sufficient funds to be a paying concern. As for my belongings, well, I shall regret a painting or two, perhaps a statuette, but there is nothing else that cannot be replaced in time. I shall regret that old Irivor and I shall never again share a bottle and boast about the good old days, but that’s about it. And now, no more arguments. I shall need my wits about me to get out of these cursed updrafts.”

The spires of the Upper City swung about us as Lukor manipulated the controls with finesse. At this altitude the air was biting and thin, but the winds were furious and gusty, screaming like so many banshees. I ducked down behind the cowling of my cockpit, shivering and wishing I had not so recklessly tossed aside my warm woolen cloak.

After a bit Lukor found a steady downdraft and rode it in wide circles. The tiers of the Middle City swung below our hurtling keel and I caught a flying glimpse of the slums and squalid alleys of the Lower City before they were whipped from sight. One swift look and I recognized the slave pens where the wheel slaves were immured and remembered the dreary days Kojá and I had spent behind those beetling walls.

How strange a thing is a man’s life! A twist of fate, a turn of the balance, and he is thrust from one situation to the next, with very little say in the matter. Never had I thought to escape that frowning fortress -but, once out of it, wandering the windy streets of the Middle City in garments stolen from the man I had killed, I had wondered where I should find a haven of safety. And then I had seen an unknown gentleman fighting for his life against a gang of street thugs!

Had I not impulsively-even rashly-sprang to his side to set my blade with his, I should not at this hour be hurtling through the wind in this flying contraption, on my way to new adventures in strange lands.

Cause and effect rule the universe, say the philosophers. Well, that may be. But I would cast my vote for blind Chance as the most significant factor in human affairs, if not in the very cosmos itself. For it was Chance that I stumbled upon the Lost City there in the trackless jungles of Cambodia, Chance that Kojá spared my life because of the unusual color of my hair and eyes, Chance that I should have encountered the Princess battling against the vastodon when I was escaping from the Yathoon camp through the jungles, and Chance that I had made a friend of Lukor the Swordmaster.

Before long we left the City in the Clouds behind us and were flying through the White Mountains. It was with a curious mingling of nostalgia and relief that I watched the turrets of Zanadar fall away behind our stern. There I had known not only the grim squalor of slavery and the terror of being a hunted fugitive, but also the snug safety of a home and the kindness of a friend. But now that chapter in my adventures was fading behind me.

To either side lay some of the most spectacular scenic wonders imaginable: soaring cliffs and jagged peaks of snowy marl, crumbling plains and boulder-strewn plateaus, riven weirdly with the clefts of terrific ravines and gorges. We were traveling at truly fantastic velocity now, riding a gale that blew due south towards the foothills and the black and crimson carpet of the Grand Kumala that lay beyond.

We had descended a couple of thousand feet by now, but the screaming winds were still as biting cold as the edge of a knife. I huddled low in the cockpit, clutching my shoulders in an effort to keep warm. But despite the cold, this was certainly a better way to travel than on foot. It would have taken us days,

perhaps weeks, to make our way through the desolate mountains of Varan-Hkor. And here we were coasting far above them in style, if not exactly in comfort.

I paused to reflect on the marvels I had seen. Such a fantastic flying contraption as this aerial outrigger canoe denoted an extraordinary technology. The civilization of the Zanadarians was the highest I had seen or heard of in all my months on Thanator. How could it be that one people, like the Sky Pirates, possessed stone cities, flying ships-even that tripod-like television crystal I had seen when Prince Thuton had conversed with Arkola of the Black Legion-while another, like the Yathoon Horde, were so far down the scale of culture that they could not even read or write?

Such enormous cultural differences were common enough on Earth, I reflected, where supersonic jet liners hurtled over the jungles of New Guinea, whose inhabitants are still scarcely out of the Stone Age. But this is due, in part, to the enormous distances involved. On Earth, vast oceans and entire continents separate such widely different cultures, but such is not the case on Thanator, which as a moon is much smaller than a planet. Indeed, Thanator measures only four thousand three hundred and fifty-one miles from pole to pole. The Zanadarians and the Yathoon are virtually neighbors-why then are they so vastly apart in the scale of cultural development?

And these ruminations brought me to another mystery. How was it possible a people such a Koja's, obviously evolved from some species of insect, probably one of the so-called "social insects" like ant, termite, or bee, could have grown to the rudiments of civilization on the same world with human inhabitants-the Sky Pirates, the Ku Thad, and the Perushtarians?

On Earth the insects evolved to a certain level and stopped, entering a stage of cultural stasis millions of years ago. Terrene insects were not truly intelligent beings, were not self-aware, but possessed a rudimentary intelligence called "the hive mind." Man alone had fully evolved into a rational being, and yet both species shared all those millions of square miles, surely room enough for both to develop intelligence!

Yet here on Thanator, which was only a fraction of Earth's size, two completely independent civilizations had come into being, and two widely different species had evolved to rationality side by side.

Apart, and yet close.

Dwelling only two thousand miles from each other in spatial terms-yet millions of years apart, culturally.

The arthropods had learned nothing from the Zanadarians, not even the rudiments of technology, the use of the alphabet, or the simplest of humane emotions.

Yet both races spoke the same language!

It was a mystery, all right. And a baffling one.

And I had a hunch that when at last I found the answer it would prove an astounding one!

Darloona swam groggily back to consciousness while we were still flying out of the White Mountains.

As might have seemed natural, she was wildly furious at me, and at my companions as well. Her anger at me was understandable-after all, I had knocked her unconscious in order to get her into the flying machine, which was an action hardly conducive to bettering our personal relations. But her rancor towards the gallant old Swordmaster was also virulent, and with less cause.

“I beseech you, sir, as you are a gentleman, to give over this attempt to flee and return to Zanadar. If you will take me back to the citadel, I will intercede with Prince Thuton on your behalf, and I can assure you that you will not be punished for your crimes,” she vowed.

Lukor fixed her with a courteous gaze, but firmly shook his head.

“My lady,” he said gently, “you are suffering from a most extreme misapprehension. Prince Thuton is not your friend, but one of your most active enemies -and we here with you are truly your friends.”

“How can it be a friendly action to kidnap me from the company of a powerful prince who has vowed to lend his forces to assist me in regaining my throne?” she demanded.

Lukor again shook his head. “No, my lady, that, too, is a misapprehension. For, while Thuton may be suave and charming, his charm lies entirely on the surface-underneath he is wily, scheming, and treacherous. Regardless of what he may vow to you, I know it for a fact that behind your back he was negotiating with your arch foe, the Lord of the Black Legion.”

She stared at him incredulously.

“Yes! This ‘friend,’ as you are pleased to call him, coldly and callously offered to sell you to the Chac Yuul-if they could meet his price!”

Her eyes flew to me as Lukor enunciated this last item of information. It was exactly what I had told her below in the royal box, when I was attempting to persuade her to mount the rope ladder and enter the flying machine. Now I nodded and added my affirmation to Lukor’s avowal.

“He is right, Princess. It’s true-I know it, for, while I was lost and wandering through the maze of secret passages that lies within the walls of the royal citadel, I overheard Thuton discussing the matter of the price he had set on you with none other than Arkola himself.”

“But that is absurd,” she protested weakly. “What would Arkola be doing in Zanadar? Surely he is in my city of Shondakor, almost three hundred korads to the southeast!”

I explained, as best I could within the technological limits of my Thanatorian vocabulary, about the television crystal atop the tripod. Lukor had heard of such instruments-he called them palungordra, which means “far-seeing eyes”-but they were not known to Darloona, and she was somewhat skeptical. However, she did not argue the point and made no further attempts to persuade Lukor to turn back; instead, she fell into a meditative silence, obviously mulling over our words. My own beliefs she could doubtless discount as the result of prejudice and ignorance, for, although I do not believe she any longer regarded me with contempt as a vile and treacherous amatar, devoid of honesty or honor, I had still not fully redeemed myself in her eyes. But Lukor, as I have noted before, was the sort of decent and honorable gentleman you instinctively trusted on first meeting, and his stout, unwavering, firm, and sincere statements on Thuton’s villainy she could not so easily disregard.

By this time it must have been late afternoon. The canopy of golden vapor that is the sky of Callisto was still bright with day; two moons were aloft, the frosted azure globe of Ramavad and tiny golden Amalthea, or Juruvad, as the Thanatorians call it. The mighty bulk of Gordrinator, that banded colossus of the skies, hove into view ere long.

We flew for hours.

I was becoming rather weary of the enforced inactivity, and, to tell the truth, the seat in my cockpit was rather hard and by now it had become most uncomfortable. I could not recall just when I had last had anything to eat and or drink, but my belly was clamoring for attention.

We were traveling along at a frightful clip, fairly zipping along. The wind was terrific over the foothills. At this rate we would be out of them in no time, and could perhaps land and seek game and make camp for the night.

Ahead to the south stretched the vast black and crimson carpet of the Grand Kumala, which extended from horizon to horizon. It occurred to me after a time that Lukor should begin veering away to the east, for in that direction lay the city of Ganatol, his homeland, and thence we were bound. I leaned forward, tapped the Swordmaster on the shoulder, and shouted into his ear something to that effect. He turned a rather grim and worried face to me.

“I quite agree with you, my young friend,” he said brusquely. “And, believe me, I would turn east if I could.”

“What do you mean? What’s gone wrong?”

He forced a laugh.

“I have been complimenting myself on my luck in finding an air current to ride,” he confessed wryly, “but now that luck has turned, alas! The current has grown steadily more powerful. So long as it carried us in the direction in which we wished to travel, I made no objection and did not bother my mind with the increasing force of the wind. But some little time ago I decided it was about time to start curving away to the east-and found I could nod”

I stared at him blankly.

“You mean the wind is too strong?”

He nodded. “It is very strong. It is almost a hurricane. But that is not the trouble! The vans of the ornithopter are equipped with ailerons for just such a condition: by varying the pitch and angle of our movable surfaces, we should be able to veer even in a gale. But we cannot-look-can you see?”

I followed his pointing arm and studied our port wing. The ailerons, or whatever the movable rear surfaces on the aft side of the wing are properly called, were manipulated by foot pedals in the pilot’s cockpit which Lukor occupied. These pedals communicate with the movable surfaces by means of wires and pulleys, the wires exiting from the hull through a row of small ports just above wing level.

I looked.

We had not made our escape from the City in the Clouds unscathed!

A steel dart from a guard’s crossbow had lodged in our port aileron, fouling the guy-wire.

I tightened my jaw grimly, as the import of this discovery sank in slowly. Without the use of that aileron, we could not turn. We had lost our control of the flying machine, and the rapidly growing gale in whose grip we were now helpless would sweep us many leagues off our course . . . on and on over the trackless jungles of the Grand Kumala.

And night was coming.

15. THE HAND OF FATE

Helpless in the grip of gale-force winds, we were driven farther and farther off course, flying ever further south over the trackless maze of jungles known as the Grand Kumala.

Night was upon us now, the magically swift, sudden nightfall of Thanator. I do not believe I have yet in this narrative described the strange and almost supernatural nature of daybreak and nightfall on the jungle moon.

Day and night would seem to have no connection with the presence or even the number of Thanator's moons in her skies. Those strange skies of drifting golden vapor, like curdled flame of amber and yellow, remain constantly brilliant and evenly luminous for a period of something that seems like twelve hours. Then they dim and darken, without any apparent cause, to darkness which lasts for an equal period.

At this colossal distance, of course, the sun is far too small to have any important effect as far as illuminating the surface of Callisto is concerned."

I have noticed, time and again, that the daylight sky of Thanator remains uniformly brilliant when no moons are aloft, as it does when all four of the inner moons and even the titanic sphere of Jupiter are in the heavens. From this I can only suppose that, at periodic intervals, Thanator is bathed in some unknown radiation which sparks a luminiferous effect in the golden vapor of her upper atmosphere, which is probably a layer of some inert gas like neon which becomes incandescent when subjected to electrical current. Perhaps at regular intervals Jupiter gives off a storm of electrical particles which interact with the inert gas of Callisto's stratosphere. Or perhaps the luminous periods are due to the actions of some completely unknown force or phenomenon. I cannot say with any degree of certainty; I can but report the phenomenon as I have personally observed it.

At daybreak, then, the entire dome of the sky flushes with soft brilliant radiance which takes about seven or eight minutes to go the full cycle from a velvety brown gloom to full noontide luminance. The experience is most startling when you are first exposed to it—it is almost as if the entire heavens are illuminated by some colossal explosion. The luminosity remains constant, unvarying, a sourceless glow, until the hour of nightfall, when the phenomenon is reversed. Again, it takes about seven to eight minutes, as nearly as I can calculate the time without a watch, for full daylight to be replaced by brown velvet darkness.

The only effect this cycle has on the appearance of the moons is that, of course, they seem more brilliant at night, when they are not in competition with the radiance cast by that dome of glowing golden vapors.

Hence night was suddenly upon us. It was as if some cosmic magician cast his spell over an entire world, darkening its sun. I groaned a bitter curse

It would be difficult enough to unsnarl or repair the vital control wires by day; by night it might well prove

impossible.

“Is there nothing you can do, Lukor, to free the wire?”

He shook his head grimly.

“I have been working the pedals, hoping to dislodge the quarrel, but to no avail,” he said.

“What is it? What has gone wrong?” Darloona asked suddenly. We had been conversing, Lukor and I, in terse whispers, to avoid spreading panic. The girl, sunk in a brooding melancholy, had not been aware of our dangerous plight. But she must have overheard us talking, for now she turned a questioning gaze on our pilot, the old Swordmaster. He explained the problem in swift, economical terms.

“Every second is carrying us farther south at a frightful speed,” he concluded. “We are many korads into the Grand Kumala by now, and traveling yet deeper with every moment that passes. Unless I can somehow free the aileron and turn the flying contraption about and to the east, we shall end up at the pole!”

“Is there nothing you can do?” solemn-faced Koja inquired in his harsh, expressionless voice.

“Nothing,” Lukor said with grim finality. “I fear to use the pedals again, for any further attempt may snap them. The quarrel from the crossbow has them snarled and they may well be frayed by this time, from rubbing against its edges. But they are most certainly not broken. Neither does the aileron seem to have been pierced by the bolt. The shaft seems merely to have lodged itself in the slit between the inner surface of the aileron and the rear surface of the wing. But unless we can manage to remove the obstruction, we are helpless, and will be carried hundreds of korads off course, for my city of Ganatol is far behind us by now, and to the east.”

I bitterly regretted the untimely arrival of darkness in that it would make all the more difficult the feat I knew I must now attempt.

With a swift word to Lukor, advising him to adjust the balance of the ornithopter as best he could in order to compensate for the shift in weight, I climbed out of the cockpit and put one leg over the side.

“Jandar-what are you trying to do?” Darloona shrieked as the flying machine swung giddily to port under my weight. I forced a careless laugh, although it was somewhat difficult to do as my heart was in my mouth at the time.

“Tut, Princess,” I said gaily. “If the aileron control wire is fouled there is nothing to be done but to clear it. Steady as you go, now, Lukor-“

And I climbed out onto the wing.

I am not really a particularly brave man, although the necessities of chance and fate have occasionally forced me into the role of one. Hence, in all candor, I must admit I was frightened. I was acutely aware that we were hurtling through the night at something under a hundred miles an hour in a flimsy craft made of baked and compressed paper.

I was also terribly conscious of the fact that we were flying at something like fifteen hundred feet above one of the thickest of all jungles, and that the slightest misstep would hurl me to a swift and certain death.

The wind whipped past me, clutching at my body with invisible fingers. My eyes teared from the blast of stinging air until I was almost blind. My hair and my garments whipped about me with such force that it was all that I could do to keep my hold on the edge of the cockpit.

If I lost my grip I would be torn loose like a leaf in a hurricane, and the wind would whip me away to hurl me like a human bomb down through the thick branches far below. I recall once reading an adventure story by Lin Carter in which his hero is marooned on the narrow ledge of a mountain peak, high above a deep lake. When at length the hero could retain his balance no longer and sprang into the air, he fell like a stone into the lake-but lived, because he fell at just the precisely correct angle so that his body met the surface of the lake with a minimum impact.* But there was no lake below me, and, alas, I had no solicitous Author watching over my fortunes, ready to bring a bit of aerodynamic hocus-pocus to my rescue, had I fallen!

Bracing myself against the terrific force of the gale, I strove to reach the tightly lodged crossbow bolt. But my arms were not long enough-my fingers brushed the hullward edge of the aileron but fell several inches short of where the quarrel was wedged.

There was nothing else to do, then, but to climb outside the wing, and stand on the pontoon-like undercarriage. This undercarriage, which I mentioned somewhat earlier, consisted of two long pontoons, one to either side of the hull, filled with the compressed levitant gas that rendered the contraption airworthy. Had it not been for them, there would have been no way I could have reached the snarled wire, for of course the wing itself could not bear my weight.

With infinite care, still clinging with both hands to the cowling of my cockpit, I lowered first one leg and then the other, until at last I was standing on the portside pontoon. It was braced by narrow struts to the pontoon on the starboard side, and both were attached to keel and to the base of the wings by yet more struts. I sincerely hoped that these members were strong enough to bear my weight. If they were not, then we were in real trouble!

Now, standing sidewise on the gas-filled pontoon, I removed my grip from the cowling of my cockpit, and transferred my grip to the edge of the wing itself. This I did in agonizing slow motion, because I was terribly afraid that the wind would tear me loose and whirl me away into the night.

Looking up, I caught a glance at Darloona. She was staring at me with awe and terror in her enormous eyes. Her face was pale, and one hand lifted so that her knuckles were pressed tightly against her lips.

Suddenly I felt recklessly heroic! It was delightful to discover that someone aboard this flying deathtrap was even more frightened than I!

I wondered if the beautiful Princess of Shondakor still considered me a weakling and a coward. Doubtless she was convinced by this death-defying feat that I was a lionhearted hero. I could have laughed out loud at the thought. Actually, I was so terrified my knees were trembling.

Now I was clinging with both hands to the edge of the wing, my feet resting one in front of the other on the pontoon. Again I strove to reach the lodged bolt, but I simply could not.

Well, there was nothing else to do, so I sat down on the pontoon, straddling it uncomfortably, my legs hanging over either side, my hands above me, holding onto the edge of the wing.

Now, slowly and with enormous care, I transferred the grip of each hand from wing edge to the struts

which held the pontoon fastened beneath the portside wing.

I breathed a silent prayer that the Sky Pirates of Zanadar had built the strongest paper airplanes known to the universe!

Now I released the strut with my left hand, and leaned far out to the side, groping for the underside of the aileron.

By tilting myself at a sickening forty-five-degree angle, I finally managed to reach the damned crossbow bolt. My fingers were numb with the cold wind, but I could feel the pointed tip of the quarrel where it was thrust through the slit between aileron and wing surface.

Gripping it between the tips of my fingers, hanging almost face down over the jungles that rushed by at a nauseating velocity beneath me, I began working the head of the quarrel back and forth, back and forth, gradually working it loose.

When, after an infinity of time that was probably only two minutes in duration, I had worked it so loose that it trembled at a touch, I reached up around the aileron and felt along the shaft of the quarrel to see if it was entangled with the guy-wire.

To do this I had to stretch from my place until most of my body was hanging over empty space. I retained hold of the pontoon with my right leg alone, which was hooked over it, while my left leg hung free.

My fingers were trembling with the strain. My wrist and forearm were numb and taut. With infinite care I felt the tangle of the wires and, wriggling the crossbow bolt between my fingers, I managed to draw it free of the wire a fraction of an inch at a time.

Thanks to whatever Almighty God or Gods rule this world, the crossbowmen of Zanadar use smooth-headed bolts! For if this article had been barbed with a hooked arrowhead I could never in a million years have worked it free from the tangle of wires in my precarious position, hanging head down over the abyss, holding on with my right arm alone, and unable to see what the hell my left hand was doing!

With a twang of suddenly-drawn-taut wires the quarrel came free and flew away, and I felt as glad as the inhabitant of Death Row whose local governor has had a change of heart just as they were strapping him in the chair.

Wires creaked as Lukor tested his pedals.

The aileron flapped up and down.

Everything was fine again, and I could begin drawing my aching, ice-cold, and exhausted body back to a more secure seat on that pontoon. Taking it very slowly I retraced my former actions until I was standing erect on the pontoon. Then, moving my hands an inch at a time-my whole arm from wrist to shoulder trembling with strain and fatigue-I inched my hold along the wing until I was facing the cockpit again. Darloona, Lukor, and Kojja were staring at me.

I got the feeling none of them had been breathing while I had been out on the wing.

From the ache in my lungs I suddenly realized I had been holding my breath, too.

I hooked one half-frozen arm over the side of the cowling, and hauled my left knee up onto the edge of the wing. Then I levered my weight up, until my right foot was off the pontoon.

And then it was that the hand of Fate played an amusing little trick

My right arm, numb from the strain, slipped sickeningly, hurling me backwards.

My right leg, which was still stiffly extended, came crashing down with all my weight on the heel.

Directly onto that hollow pontoon of stressed paper which was filled with the levitating gas

And punched a hole right through it!

We sagged, our aerial contraption floundering from side to side as the precious gas went screaming out through that horrible rent in the balloon-pontoon.

The flying machine veered suddenly to port, hanging at a steep angle.

Obviously both pontoons held the same amount of gas, thus perfectly balancing the weight of the craft.

And it was equally obvious that, with one pontoon breached, we were no longer airworthy.

I tried to plug the hole with a bunch of cloth, with the palm of my hand, with my foot-it was no good. The gas was escaping rapidly. The pontoon was almost half empty by this time, and we were losing altitude very fast.

Lukor played on the controls like a virtuoso on the keyboard, striving to right our sickening tilt, striving to bring the flying machine into a smooth glide. but it could not be done.

The gale was too powerful.

As we lost flying trim, sagging drunkenly to port, the flat of the wing swung about-caught the full force of the howling gale-and was torn to rags in an instant.

I was almost flung loose as half the wing fabric sheared away and slapped me violently in the side of the head.

We fell in a long wobbling curve towards the tree tops far below.

In mere moments we would hit those upper branches, and at the speed we were traveling our craft would be torn apart and we would be slammed with killing force to the ground below.

My mind was working now with incredible rapidity.

Suddenly, the most audacious plan sprang full-blown into my head. It had about one chance in a thousand of working-but, unless we tried it, we wouldn't have even that one chance.

Yelling like a madman I told my companions what to do.

They must have thought me insane, but the urgency and the note of command in my voice must have

been so completely compelling that they sprang almost instantly to obey my directions.

It was probably that instantaneous obedience on the part of Darloona, Lukor, and Koja that saved all our lives.

It was a crazy gamble but there was simply nothing else to do.

They climbed out of their cockpits onto the starboard pontoon, which was still, thank the Gods, airtight!

The moment they were all out on the pontoon, I swung underneath the hurtling keel like an acrobat, swung along a strut until I, too, clung on that last pontoon.

Then, hacking away with our swords flying, like crazy men, we cut loose the pontoon!

All was a tumbling fall through whirling darkness-the treetops horribly close-wind blinding us-it was a miracle we managed to cut the pontoon clear of the hull and wing in time.

But we did.

Now a dead weight, the hulk of the flying craft was swept away from us. It struck the treetops with a sickening impact that tore it apart, smashing it into a spray of flying fragments. It must have been traveling at close to a hundred miles an hour when it suddenly lost all buoyancy at once, and swerved into collision with the trees beneath us.

As for we four mad mariners of the sky, we dangled with our hands alone clinging to the stubs of the severed struts. The sole remaining pontoon floated above us like a weightless log. With the dead weight of the wings, hull, and empty portside pontoon cleared away, the amount of gas in the remaining pontoon was just barely sufficient to hold us aloft.

Our brush with death had been so miraculously close that I was tempted to ascribe the whole affair to some unseen Jovian Providence. A few seconds delay would have been fatal-we would still have been hacking away at the struts when the craft collided with the treetops.

It was the narrowest escape I have ever experienced, or have ever heard of, for that matter.

We spent the rest of that night on the ground. Not even up in the crotch of one of the soaring borath trees, which would have afforded us safety from the predators who prowled the jungle aisles at night. No-we had, all of us, had enough of aerial high jinks to last a lifetime. I, for one, would be delighted to try my luck against any creature aprowl in the jungle rather than leave the safe flatness of solid ground.

Our levitating pontoon, of course, was not enough to hold the four of us aloft for long. But the blessed thing did indeed suffice to break our speed of descent so that we floated down, buffeted by the winds, and climbed off onto big solid branches. It took us a long time to climb down to the ground from there; we were all shaking with fatigue and nervous exhaustion from our narrow brush with destruction. But reach the good old terra firma (or Callista firma, as you prefer) we did at last.

We were just too bone-weary to worry about anything else right then, so we decided to camp right where we were. Lukor still had the flint-and-steel in his girdle wherewith he had lit his oil lamp when he and I had been exploring the secret passages within the walls of the royal citadel of Zanadar, so we managed to make a good bonfire with dead leaves and dry branches. Then we curled up and slept the heavy dreamless sleep of the completely exhausted.

The next day we found a jungle stream from which to drink our fill of cold, clear, deliciously pure water. And Koja, the hunter, spotted a game trail beaten to the water's edge. While we hid he watched the trail, and before very long a family of vastodons, the elephant boars of the Thanatorian jungles, came down the trail for a drink. He rose out of hiding, flailing away with his whip-sword, and managed to kill a cow vastodon.

Hacking boar steaks off the kill with our blades and roasting the dripping red meat over a fire, we feasted gloriously. I have eaten in the finest restaurants in my world, from Antoine's in New Orleans to Luk Chow's in Hong Kong, but never have I enjoyed a meal more than that half-raw, half-charred chunk of bloody vastodon steak chewed down without tenderizer, spices, or even salt and pepper.

Of course, this was the first food I had eaten in the past two days, which may have lent savor to the entrée!

It was about three days later that Fate again took a hand in our affairs.

We had been working our way due east, or as due east as we could ascertain, for it was difficult to tell directions on a world in which no sun lights the sky, arcing from east to west like a natural compass needle. According to what we could tell, the nearest settlement of men should be a dozen korads in that direction.

We covered quite a bit of territory in three days-the bulk of the Grand Kumala, in fact. Our progress through the jungle country was greatly facilitated by the discovery of a swift-flowing river which poured out of the mountains and curved away east, probably joining with the Ajand further on.

It had not been difficult to cut supple lianas, lash together fallen logs into a crude and flimsy raft, and set ourselves adrift. The rushing current carried us many leagues, and we traveled faster and easier than had we been forced to hack a path through the dense jungle underbrush on foot. Poling our way past obstructions, battling off the attacks of nameless river creatures-I shall not bore my reader with a drawn-out account of our struggle downriver, for it is easily told in summary.

We were forced, towards the close of the third day, to leave the river and press forward on foot, for here it angled away sharply to the south.

Towards nightfall disaster struck.

Without the slightest warning, as we were making our way across an open glade, a gigantic beast sprang roaring from the underbrush right into our midst, scattering us to all sides.

It was a full-grown deltagar, a horned, scarlet, tigerlike beast such as the one I had ridden to its death in the arena of Zanadar, as big as four tigers rolled into one, armed with claws like steel hooks and glistening bared fangs like naked scimitars-a fearsome opponent even for a heavily armed hunting party to encounter. And we were but three men and a girl, and armed but lightly.

The monster charged Koja and me. The arthropod snatched me up under one arm and leaped out of the way, his grasshopper-like lower limbs carrying the two of us halfway across the jungle clearing with a single bound.

Baffled, snarling, the deltagar whirled to charge Darloona, who was on the other side of the glade from our position. She turned on her heel and ran into the shelter of the thick underbrush to avoid its charge.

The beast went crashing after her but gallant Lukor sprang in its path, brandishing his rapier and yelling to capture its attention.

Alas, the brute was in no mood for a challenge. Hunting must have been poor in this sector of the Kumala, for the deltagar looked half-starved, ribs thrusting like curved struts through the scarlet fur of its sides. So it did not swerve to engage Lukor but merely clouted him aside with a terrific buffet from one mighty paw, and sprang after the fleeing girl. In an instant the jungle had swallowed it up, but we could hear it crashing and floundering through the bushes, getting further and further away.

The savage blow of the deltagar's forepaw had knocked the old Swordmaster reeling. He lay sprawled some distance away, white-faced, scarlet leaking from his scalp. Koja sprang after the deltagar, in search of Darloona, while I paused to see what I could do for Lukor. As soon as I ascertained that the old man was not seriously harmed—merely unconscious and bleeding freely from a light scalp wound—I followed Koja to help in the search. But I met Koja returning to the clearing: neither Darloona nor the deltagar were to be found. She must have fled far into the depths of the jungle to avoid the hungry predator.

The next two days were consumed in a grim and desperate search for the lost Princess of Shondakor. We searched day and night for any sign of the missing girl, but we found nothing.

The deltagar, however, left a clear track due to its enormous size and weight. Acting on the assumption that the beast was also tracking the Princess, we tracked the beast. I was in a restless fever of impatience, for I was horribly conscious of the fact that Darloona was completely unarmed.

Towards dawn on the third day of her disappearance we burst suddenly through a screen of trees and gazed in amazement at an incredible sight.

At first my heart lifted with buoyant hope. But ere long those hopes were dashed into despair.

For the sight upon which we stared in grim silence was more terrible than words can express.

I shall never exorcise from my memory the profound horror of what I saw as we stepped through the fringes of the jungle and stared at that which lay before us on the broad plain under the golden skies of morn . . .

16. DARLOONA-FAREWELL!

As I sit here in my tent, day after day, laboriously inscribing this account of my adventures on the weird and marvelous world called Thanator, I am possessed of a curious sense of futility and of hopelessness.

I watch as the brilliant and varicolored moons of Thanator one by one ascend her strange skies of golden vapor. They are familiar to me now, those gorgeous orbs of colored fire—tiny Juruvad, a disk of bright gold, lime-green Orovad, the immense frosty azure sphere of mighty Ramavad, and the rose-red globe of glorious Imavad, the nearest of the four moons.

Like goblin lanterns they fill the world with rich and marvelous hues, casting weird multiple shadows from

the gnarled black trunks of the many trees along the edge of the Grand Kumala. Like the glaring eyes of a host of Cyclops they stare down at me as they drift through the dim skies of this jungle moon.

They are old friends, by now. No longer do I miss the wrinkled, pitted, gray-silver face of Earth's own satellite.

But then the colossal arc of Jupiter thrusts above the dark and distant horizon. Bit by bit the Lord of the Sky lifts his titanic globe to fill the heavens. A vast surface of luminous yellow and ocher is his shining face, banded with horizontal zones of darker sulphur and curdled brown and gloomy puce. And in the southern hemisphere, the great Red Spot blazes like an angry crimson eye-vast-dwarfing even the moons.

And in the presence of that banded giant of the skies, suddenly I am a stranger to this world again and crave to return to dwell under skies that are blue and not golden, and where but one moon rides the tides of darkness.

For the rising of mighty Gordrinator brings back to me the fact that I am farther from my home than any man who has ever lived. For I am three hundred and ninety million miles from the planet whereon I was born-and three hundred and ninety million is a lot of miles.

Although I have lived for months on Thanator, and made good friends, and found a life for myself, a cause and a mission, it still is not home to me. Nor will it, perhaps, ever be

My hands are weary from writing. With a sigh I put down the pen I have cut from a thaptor quill, set aside the neat stack of coarse fibrous brown papyrus, and step forth from my tent onto the lawn of crimson grass that slopes down from the edge of the jungle.

Like exiled Lucifer staring at the locked gates of Heaven, I stare down through the gloaming at that which stands, an eternal enigma, on the slope below me.

A ring of monoliths, encircling a thick broad disk of milky substance like pallid Soochow jade.

The Gate Between The Worlds

It is the irony of all ironies that I have found it at last-now that- I can never use it to return again to the world where I was born!

Perhaps I am an obstinate fool. For, indeed, the way lays open before me-in two nights, the Ku Thad tell me, that flickering shaft of throbbing light that is the mode of travel between the worlds will thrust up from the disk of lambent jade amidst the ring of standing stones.

I could enter there, naked as first I came, and after that timeless interval of flashing speed, of cruel cold, of absolute darkness, find myself yet again within that Lost City in the jungles of Cambodia. Or such, at least, is my assumption; for whether the Gate links together yet other worlds than Callisto and the Earth, I cannot be certain.

And, indeed, why should I not go? This world is strange to me, and every man desires at last, however far he has traveled, to go home.

What, then, is there to keep me here? Koja and I have long since discharged our debts of uhorz in service to each other-he set me free and provided me with a thaptor, twice, as I recall; and I rescued him

from death in the great arena of Zanadar at peril of my own life. We are quits; or, rather, say that we are friends now, with all debts canceled.

And I do not think I owe anything to Lukor, although I will always be grateful to him for his hospitality and his friendship. But I feel no guilt at being the cause for which he fled from the City in the Clouds, leaving behind his home, his work, and everything he possessed. For in truth he did it gladly, willingly, of his own volition, the act prompted more by his romantic love of adventure and derring-do, I think, than for me.

Yes . . . I could step between those pillars of carven stone the day after tomorrow, and return again to my home and the planet of my birth.

But I cannot!

Instead, after I add a few final touches to this manuscript, and bundle it securely, with a covering sheet that requests the finder to deliver it to my old friend Major Gary Hoyt in Saigon and claim a reward, I shall toss the bundle of closely written pages within that lambent shaft of occult radiance. Old Zastro, the wise man of the Ku Thad, who has studied the weird phenomenon of the Gate Between The Worlds, assures me that only organic material can be carried from one world to the next within the beam. That explains why I materialized on the surface of Thanator as naked as in the hour of my birth . . . my clothing, boots, everything, even my identity tags and my wristwatch, were of nonorganic substances like metal or plastic or synthetic cloth. Thus they were left behind in the Lost City of Arangkor, while I flew through space as a cloud of dematerialized force.

But the manuscript is completely organic in nature, the paper a crude reed papyrus, the ink a distillation of the fluidic secretions of a squidlike river beast. Hence the manuscript should be transported successfully to Earth. It may molder undiscovered and unread for years, until rain and sun and decay render it forever undecipherable. I only hope that such is not the case, for it seems to me that I have undergone the most remarkable series of adventures within the span of human knowledge, and I feel it my duty to pass along some account of the mysteries and marvels I have discovered here upon this strangest, most terrible, and yet most beautiful of all worlds.

I shall watch the disappearance of my manuscript with a mingling of emotions my reader, if any, can doubtless imagine for himself.

For while my written account of my months upon Thanator voyages between the worlds, eventually, I hope, to rematerialize on the Earth-I cannot!

For one debt remains undischarged. One obligation yet holds me its helpless prisoner.

The knowledge that I could never turn aside from this quest came to me, weeks ago, there at the eastern borders of the black and crimson jungles, when with Kojia and Lukor I stared at a sight of nameless and profound horror.

And in all the days since then, to this very hour, I have not been able to forget that terrible vision.

Nothing that has happened since then is worthy of much in the way of recording. Hopelessly, my comrades and I turned aside from the sight that we had seen, to reenter the Grand Kumala. Days later we encountered a hunting party of Darloona's people, the Ku Thad. At first we were in danger of imminent death, for upon this jungle moon the hand of -every, man is lifted in eternal enmity against every other man. But when we divulged that we had accompanied the Princess of Shondakor out of captivity

and had made ourselves her friends and protectors, we found ourselves very welcome among the Golden People, whose leader, the Lord Yarrak, Darloona's uncle, had long since thought his niece the Princess slain by some jungle beast.

And so we joined forces with the exiled Ku Thad. Learning of my desire to find again the Gate Between The Worlds, they escorted me to it, for they know it well, as they know all the paths and byways of this mighty jungle. And so, ironically, I found that for which I had yearned so long, now that I could no longer use it!

Yarrak himself suffers from a deep and personal sorrow; yet is he gentle with me for cause of mine own. He drew from me gently my account of the terrible thing we had seen-the thing I have been so reluctant to describe in cold words. Knowing now what I know, he too understands why I cannot again retrace my weird and magical flight between the worlds to the planet of my birth.

For I am chained to this world until such time as I shall know the truth. Until at last I have learned of the ultimate fate of the Princess Darloona, whether she be yet alive or whether her young and lovely body is cold and stark in the grip of death.

Never shall I forget that terrible moment when, with Koja and Lukor at my side, I peered through the edges of the jungle and looked upon a broad and fertile plain in whose midst arose the mighty ramparts of a walled city of stone.

"It is Shondakor itself," Koja said in his expressionless metallic voice. Shondakor-!

I gazed upon the splendid metropolis with amazement . . . upon the lofty towers, the splendid mansions and palaces, the broad and level boulevards, the soaring structures of intricate and heavily ornamented architecture, worked with snarling masks and carven pediments and spiral columns and long arcades. Pale golden shone Shondakor under the brilliant skies of dawn, its great structures mirrored in the broad river that flowed beneath its mighty walls, a river I knew to be the Ajand.

One narrow bridge of carven stone spanned the breadth of this broad river, ending at the bastion gate of the walled city.

Lukor seized my arm with a stifled cry.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "Is it not-?"

I looked-and felt my heart lift with a tremendous joy. For she was not dead, slain in the trackless jungles by some slaving reptile, some savage predator-she lived!

I watched as Darloona, her glorious flaming hair fluttering like a scarlet banner, rode across that bridge to the frowning gates amid a mounted escort of small, swarthy soldiers clad in leathern tunics blazoned on chest and back with the emblem of a horned black skull with eyes of red flame.

And then my heart, which had lifted on the wings of joyous hope, sank into the darkness of profound depression.

For these were warriors of the Chac Yuul-the Black Legion!

And I watched hopelessly as the woman I suddenly knew I loved more than my life itself was borne, a helpless captive, into the gates of the very stronghold of her deadliest enemies!

The gates closed behind her with a clang of ominous finality. And I never saw her again.

And it is here, at this unfinished point, without any further note, that the curious manuscript of Jonathan Andrew Dark comes to an abrupt end. Shall we ever learn the rest of his amazing story? Somehow, I doubt it. For in all these months, no further word has come from that distant, mysterious world of unknown terrors.-LIN CARTER